

**Illness and the Construction of Femininity
in the English Novel,
1840-1870**

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Jennifer Mary Curtis

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Part I: Voices of Authority	
Chapter 1.	
Order and Disorder(s): Illness, medicine and women's sexuality	17
Chapter 2.	
"Sisters by the Fireside": Prostitution, disease, and the domestic ideal	52
Chapter 3.	
Spoken in the Words of Men: appropriating a discourse of power	96
Part II: The Heroine in Decline: Illness in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell	
Chapter 4.	
Illness in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell: Introduction	129
Chapter 5.	
Mary Barton: rewriting the "do-nothing lady"	143
Chapter 6.	
Ruth: the Fallen Madonna	175
Chapter 7.	
Margaret Hale: a question of balance	203
Chapter 8.	
Cousin Phillis: Innocence, Eden, and the re-ordering of the world	243
Chapter 9.	
Molly Gibson: Challenging the Word of the Father?	272
Part III: Sensation and Numbness: Illness and the Popular Body	
Chapter 10.	
"Preaching to the Nerves": Phobic enchantment and the Textual Body	305

Chapter 11.	
Mary Braddon's Two Lucys: The Secret Life of the Hollow Body	331
Chapter 12.	
Charlotte Yonge and The Domestication of Heaven: the Almighty as Pater Familias	368
Conclusion	408
Bibliography	414

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the part played by the idea of illness in the mid-nineteenth-century construction of femininity and women's sexuality. I have investigated a variety of discourses - medical writing, the debate on prostitution, the conduct books of Sarah Ellis, and the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Braddon, and Charlotte Yonge - with the hypothesis that, in the hierarchized opposition that defined gender in the mid-nineteenth century, femininity was constituted in terms of illness, and "to be a woman was to be ill".

I have used the theoretical works of Michel Foucault to look at the way in which discourse transmits and produces power. In Part One, I show how the 'masculine' discourses of medical texts and the debate on prostitution produced an ideal of femininity which confined woman to the domestic sphere, and pathologized her sexuality by defining it in terms of reproduction. In these texts, in order to universalize the ideal of domestic womanhood, the differences of class are of less importance than those of gender. Conduct books by women, on the other hand, while constraining women to the domestic sphere, produce a construction of womanhood which is active rather than passive, healthy rather than ill.

In Parts Two and Three, I have shown how novels by women engage with the ideal of domestic femininity, and the strategies these authors have used to redefine, appropriate, endorse, or subvert it. In each of these, illness appears in some form - madness, disease, invalidism, or "decline" - in relation to the feminine ideal and the construction of women's sexuality.

Introduction

“La femme est une malade,” wrote Jules Michelet in 1858.¹ “To be a woman is to be ill”. Six years later, on the other side of the English Channel, John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* made a best-selling statement of gender difference. When one considers man and woman, Ruskin explained, “each has nothing alike: each complements the other, and is complemented by the other: they are in nothing alike”.² In each of these texts, woman is constructed as other, her nature constituted through an essentiality which both marginalizes and pathologizes her. As other she is placed in a series of what Hélène Cixous calls “dual, hierarchized oppositions”, oppositions important to the nineteenth century construction of gender difference - public/private, strength/weakness, activity/passivity, natural/unnatural, health/illness.³ The interrelationship of illness, sexuality, and the ideal of femininity will be investigated in this thesis through a variety of discourses and in a variety of ways.

Central to my investigation will be the theoretical writings of Michel Foucault. The two texts I have chosen by way of introduction are examples of that proliferation of discourses which Foucault describes as the deployment of sexuality by the middle classes in the nineteenth century. Although Michelet was ostensibly writing about the nature of love, and Ruskin about the nature of education for boys and girls, men and women, the two books form, along with medical, juridical, social investigative journalism, conduct books and literary texts, part of the construction of sexuality which Foucault sees as central to the

¹ Jules Michelet, *L’Amour* (1858; Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1898) 52.

² John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*. (1864; London: Routledge, 1907) 87.

³ Hélène Cixous, “Sorties”, *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1975) 62.

nineteenth century. The ideal of femininity was, I argue, an important part of that construction of sexuality.

Far from being a repressive silence, there was, according to Foucault, a great speaking forth which, rather than describing and representing sexuality, produced it. Following Foucault's hypothesis, I will explore a number of these discourses, all engaged in the construction of women's sexuality, its embodiment through and regulation by these texts, a sexuality which I see constructed in terms of illness. At the same time, however, I will investigate the play of gender within such a construction. Rather than asking the essentialist question "were there differences between men's writing and women's?", I have chosen discourses which I see as being gendered, from the "masculine" sphere of medicine and public debate, and the "feminine" sphere of the novel.⁴ Although Foucault indicates the possibility of resistance when he talks of the configuration of power-knowledge-pleasure, and acknowledges the formation of reverse discourses, he does not specify a place for women as speaking subjects within his text.⁵ His discussion of the hysterization of women, which is important to my argument, is however a positing of woman as object, the object of male discourse, be it the pathologized female body under the medical gaze, or the interrogated prostitute, presented as spectacle, her words and body to be read for signs of contagion. In looking at the discourses producing women's sexuality in the nineteenth century, it is necessary, therefore, to keep in mind all the time who is writing and for what purpose. Literature, in this context, can be included, not as a reflective medium, but part of the network of discourses at play at any

⁴ For a discussion of the novel as a feminine form, see Michael Danahy, *The Feminization of the Novel* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1991).

⁵ I refer specifically to *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1* since it deals with the nineteenth century, the period with which I am concerned. There is, of course, the possibility of interpreting the generic "he" as inclusive of women, but this obscures the question. See Chapter 2 for a more extended discussion of this issue.

one time. Although women rarely found a voice in the discourses of medicine, law, or the more educated journals, literature was one institution open to them, an institution which they appeared to dominate.⁶

A history of the History of Sexuality

The most common representations of women's sexuality in the nineteenth century show how middle class ideological constraints constructed this sexuality not as diverse and heterogeneous, but dichotomous and heterosexual, based on the opposition of the madonna and the whore, the passive sexless middle class lady and the overtly sexed working class woman, whose desire is dangerous and must be contained.⁷ Such an interpretation fits in with what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis", or the construction of Victorian sexuality as a dark secret, repressing and silencing a natural inner drive which later in history has to be liberated. Such a construction of sexuality, if we follow this theory, was a ploy by the ruling classes for "the repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited", in a society which professed the sacredness and purity of the family and concealed the underworld of prostitution and venereal disease in its midst.⁸ Accordingly, writing on Victorian sexuality in the 1960s and 70s, which, prior to Foucault, would itself have been seen as revisionary, placed its emphasis on the general hypocrisy and double standards of Victorian sexual mores, an emphasis reflected in some of the titles: *Public Purity, Private Shame - Victorian Sexual Hypocrisy Exposed*, *The Dark Angel*, and *The Other Victorians*.⁹ But this type of

⁶ See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, rev. ed. (London: Virago, 1982) 37-41. Showalter points out that women writers were in fact in a minority, the illusion of their dominance resulting from contemporary references to the large number of women writers in periodicals.

⁷ See, for example, Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: an Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 123.

⁹ Ronald Pearsall, *Public Purity, Private Shame - Victorian Sexual Hypocrisy Exposed* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976); Fraser Harrison, *The Dark Angel - Aspects of Victorian*

historical analysis is based on taking the discursive evidence from the nineteenth century, parliamentary reports, articles in journals, and above all, literary texts, as being reflections of reality, without considering the way in which such discourses are productive of "reality", or acknowledging the fictionality of the literary work. Thus Walter Houghton in the section on sex in his standard text *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, uses examples taken from novels and poetry as historical evidence.¹⁰ Steven Marcus, in *The Other Victorians*, a work which has had a great impact on later writing on Victorian sexuality, also uses fiction as verification of historical facts.¹¹ In discussing the work of the venereologist William Acton, Marcus writes:

Such remarks call to mind Tertius Lydgate and George Eliot's description, in *Middlemarch*, of the state of medical practice in the England of an earlier generation. Indeed there are a number of correspondences between Lydgate and Acton, and in a curious way acquaintance with Lydgate has the effect, so to speak, of authenticating Acton, of filling him out, of making him seem less strange or out of the ordinary - which demonstrates how literature can sometimes help to retrieve the actuality of an unknown or forgotten person from the dustheap of history.¹²

Sexuality (London: Sheldon Press, 1977); Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (1964; New York: Signet, 1974).

¹⁰ Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1957) 353-372.

¹¹ Foucault refers to this work directly in *Sexuality*, vol. 1, when he named Part One "We 'Other Victorians'".

¹² Marcus 8. A similar conflation of literature and life is made by Eric Trudgill, when, for example, he describes the relationships of Dickens and Thackeray to their wives and to the female characters in their novels. He comments: "It is remarkable too that even after his detached and critical portrait of this lady [Maria Beadnell] in the person of Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit*, and despite his interest in a new kind of strong-minded heroine like Estella Magwitch and Helen Landless, in his last novels Dickens' heart should still go out so uncritically to the doll-like figures of Bella Wilfer and Rosa Bud. While such figures as these clearly represented a widespread masculine ideal, it is not surprising that many women were content to remain in happy idiocy rather than aspire to being angels". Trudgill 100. Trudgill deals with the representation of sexuality in literature as well as historically.

At no point do these writers consider the part literary texts play in the construction of a class-based hegemonic ideology of sexuality.

Early feminist analysis and revision of the standard depiction of Victorian women's sexuality also emphasized the nature of hypocrisy and double standards, while analysing the complexities of woman's role, and her oppression in a patriarchal society. Social history and feminism, in conjunction, moved away from a view of the past through the lives of "great men and women" towards what might be termed as a discovery of the "real", ordinary historical people and their everyday life. While questioning the idea of feminine passivity, and acknowledging it to be an ideological construction of an oppressive patriarchal society, feminist historical research developed in two directions. Some, like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, argued that women used the notion of passivity as a strategy or tactic for subversive behaviour, as a method of escaping unwanted sexual attention and unwanted pregnancies. As well, through illness and the exploitation of passivity to its extreme of invalidism, women could gain a degree of power by becoming the central focus of the household. Nancy Cott has shown how women, by placing an emphasis on the spiritual, asexual and bodiless, nature of women, could acquire power through the assertion of their moral superiority.¹³ Others, like Patricia Branca, emphasized the discrepancy between ideology and everyday

¹³ See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and her Role in Nineteenth Century America", *Women and Health in America*, ed. Judith Waltzer Leavitt (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin UP, 1984) 12-27; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: sex roles and role conflict in nineteenth-century America", *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 197-221; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "From Puberty to Menopause: the cycle of femininity in nineteenth century America", *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives in the History of Women*, eds. Mary Hartmann and Lois Banner (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974) 23-37; Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790 - 1850" *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 4.2 (1978): 219-236; Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth Century America", Leavitt 222-238; Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: the Sexual Politics of Illness* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973) and *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

life, producing historical evidence to show that, contrary to the representations of the asexual woman, Victorian women often led "normal" sexual lives, and were aware of issues such as birth control and abortion. These writers claim that the representation of Victorian women as passive sexless angelic figures is a distortion far from historical reality, indeed no more than a myth.¹⁴ But, in calling such a representation a myth, they do not consider the way myth makes that which is a product of culture appear to be a product of nature, "turning", according to Roland Barthes, "the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural': what is merely a product of class division and its moral, cultural, aesthetic consequences is presented (stated) as a natural consequence".¹⁵ They do not engage with any analysis of the relationship between ideological and everyday "reality", the way in which ideology was not necessarily a representation, but a construction, in this case, of an ideal of womanhood, defined in relation to gender and class difference, which then presented a norm which women could strive to adhere to or deviate from, and by which, in fact, they themselves would be defined, a norm which would influence their perception of their own subjectivity. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg come closest to this when they show how the image of womanhood produced by medicine and biology in the nineteenth century constrained women. The formulaic nature of these discourses, they argue,

¹⁴ See, for example, Patricia Branca, "Image and Reality: the Myth of the Idle Victorian Woman", Hartmann and Banner 179-191, and *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie and Mellon UP, 1974); Sara Delahunt and Lorna Duffin eds., *The Nineteenth Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); M. Jeanne Peterson, *Family, Love and Work in the Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989). A recent article by Amanda Vickery reviews the way in which such feminist history of the Victorian period has established its own ideological framework. Vickery questions the historical specificity of the ideology of the separate spheres and argues that, since there have always been separate spheres of gender power, as a concept "separate spheres" could be applied to periods other than the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that as a conceptual framework, it "has done women's history a great service". Amanda Vickery, "Shaking the separate spheres: Did women really descend into graceful indolence?" *Times Literary Supplement* March 12 1993: 6-7.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, "Mythology Today", *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1989) 65.

embodied, however, a characteristic yet entirely functional ambiguity. The Victorian woman was more spiritual than man, yet less intellectual, closer to the divine, yet prisoner of her most animal characteristics, more moral than man, yet less in control of her very morality.¹⁶

They conclude that “the very romantic rhetoric which tended to suffocate nineteenth-century discussions of femininity only underlined with irony the distance between behavioral reality and the forms of conventional ideology”.¹⁷

Since the publication of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, especially Volume 1, writing on nineteenth century sexuality has tended to take more account of ideology by concentrating more on the processes of production of sexuality rather than its representation, looking for the play of power and the production of knowledge across various discourses and practices.¹⁸ Sexuality is thus shown to be a specific historical construct, produced, for the nineteenth century woman, in a social framework established by a set of assumptions about class, woman’s biological function, moral standards, the privacy of the home and family, and the education of women. This is not to say that these assumptions were static and unchanging, or part of a monolithic orthodoxy. Through the institutions of the Church, the government, law, medicine, education and so on, they were constantly undergoing transformation and redefinition, which accounts for historical change and diversity. Nevertheless there was a degree of agreement

¹⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg 14.

¹⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg 14.

¹⁸ See, for example, Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981); Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984); Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral Politics in England since 1830* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987); Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987); and Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1990). A notable exception is Cynthia Eagle Russett’s *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1989). Recent feminist analyses, the work of Mary Poovey, Evelyn Fox Keller, Mary Jacobus, and Sally Shuttleworth, for example, will be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

overall (despite the differences of opinion over details) about the nature of women's sexuality. This sexuality was constructed according to a biological model of the female life cycle, and confined to the period from menstruation to menopause, finding expression in the institutional roles of wife and mother. Medicine, literature and art produced as a norm a feminine ideal of motherhood, while deviancy from that norm was represented by the figures of the prostitute and the adultress.¹⁹

In such a construction of women's sexuality, the idea of difference was paramount. Since it was specifically an ideal of heterosexual middle class womanhood that was being produced, differences of both gender (women as they differ from men) and class (women as they differ from other, working class or aristocratic, women) were at play in such a definition. Yet for Foucault, the middle class deployment of sexuality was first and foremost a means of self-definition and "has to be seen as the self-affirmation of one class rather than the enslavement of another: a defense, a protection, a strengthening, and an exaltation *that were eventually extended to others* - at the cost of different transformations - as the means of social control and political subjugation".²⁰ Conflict during the nineteenth century over urban space, represented in issues such as sanitation and prostitution, is interpreted by Foucault as the gradual acknowledgement by the middle classes that the working class had a body and a sexuality, which had to be kept under surveillance by a growing technology of control. Foucault would also argue that the working class were hesitant to accept this deployment. In my thesis, while I agree with those analyses of nineteenth century sexuality which emphasize class and gender difference, since such distinctions were made and were an important part of the production of sexual

¹⁹ See Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

²⁰Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 123, emphasis added.

norms, I will look at the way in which certain constructions of women's sexuality played down the difference of class in order to stress the similarity of gender. Thus the middle class discourse of medicine or the debate on prostitution, I argue, can be read as part of the deployment of sexuality, defining the working class woman's sexuality, for the most part, as being like the middle class woman's; that is, women of different classes are constructed as the same, an extension of middle class norms, rather than defined as opposites, and all are implicated, in some way, with the concept of illness.

Women's Discourse

If, as Foucault posits, there was a proliferation of discourses about sexuality in the nineteenth century, it is not enough to write of the silencing of women's sexuality, but those discourses produced by women must also be read to discover what kind of sexuality was being constructed, whether they reproduce that of male discourse, or whether they redefine, transform, or subvert that "norm". Foucault describes discourse as "a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable", not

divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. It is this distribution that we must reconstruct, with the things said and those concealed, the enunciations required and those forbidden, that it comprises; with the variants and different effects - according to who is speaking, his[/her] position of power, the institutional context in which he[/she] happens to be situated - that it implies; and with the shifts and *reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives* that it also includes.²¹

²¹ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 100 emphasis added.

Although Foucault never specifically places women as speaking subjects within his text, there are nevertheless, indications of positions from which they could speak. It would be misrepresentative to portray them as powerless:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable processes whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.²²

Therefore there were various strategies open to women writers. They could conform to and further male discourse, appropriate it for their own access to power, or reutilise it "for contrary objectives".²³

Illness and femininity

According to my central hypothesis, femininity was constructed in terms of illness - to be a woman was to be ill. Women's sexuality was also seen in terms of illness, hence my emphasis on medical discourse (reproduction as illness), the writing on prostitution as disease, conduct books, and literary texts, both as a possible site of resistance to or subversion of that particular construction and as a

²² Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 101.

²³ Although I do not deny the difficulties facing the nineteenth century woman writer, as described in the history of women's writing as another literary tradition, exemplified by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), or Elaine Showalter, *Literature*, I think it is important to investigate the discursive strategies employed by women writers, especially in the one form where they were less marginalised, and perceived as dominating. Even though the novel might have been regarded as a lesser (because feminine?) form of writing, it was of most importance to women, because it was read predominantly by women. (Elaine Showalter, *Literature* 159; Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period: 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1985). See also Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), for one example of this type of investigation.

means of furthering such a discursive formation. Although wide-reaching and influential, the discourse of women's illness was by no means monolithic. Rather, the discursive material, in the form of beliefs and truths, was produced and reproduced in kaleidoscopic variations, fragmented, diffracted and reflected in apparently different and constantly shifting patterns, from medical "fact" to literary narrative. As writers engaged with the idea of women's illness, new truths were produced, and old truths appropriated, re-inforced, redefined or subverted.

I confine my study to the period 1840 to 1870 for both literary and medical reasons. Standard literary histories conventionally describe this as a period of major development in the nineteenth-century novel. As well, in feminist literary tradition, the period covers the more "orthodox" women writers, before the advent of novels by the feminist "New Woman" writers of the last decades of the century.²⁴ In medical terms, the period after 1870 saw the emergence of new conditions concerning women, such as anorexia, neurasthenia, and also the major studies of hysteria, which would have added a new element to my work.²⁵

I have interpreted the term "illness" in its widest possible meaning. I am not so much concerned with specific illnesses, although I deal with those relating to reproduction in the chapter on medicine, as with the ideas of illness as a social act, the way illness might stand as a metaphor for other psychic or social processes, or in terms of dis-ease. Nor have I dealt with, except in passing, the older literary convention of love-sickness. Although initially I expected to find

²⁴ See Showalter, *Literature*, and Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁵ There have been many studies of these particular conditions by feminist historians, and increasingly by literary critics (in relation to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for example). See chapter 1 below for a more detailed discussion.

more evidence of love-sickness as one manifestation of illness in the texts, it occurs only marginally, to be questioned, parodied, or dismissed.²⁶ The concept of illness was problematic for women. Firstly there was the association of women and illness through the hierarchized binary oppositions which constructed femininity. But such oppositions also traded on the traditional association of woman with the body and with nature, concepts which in themselves were of an oppositional structure. With these oppositions in mind I look at the construction of the “natural” and “unnatural” woman, how women were embodied and incorporated in discourse.

Section One considers the “authorized” version of women’s illness, patriarchal discourses, which, although ostensibly fostering a sense of difference between middle and working class women, disguised the differences of class to highlight the essential similarities of gender. Those of medicine and the debate on prostitution, written by men, sought to establish women’s sexuality in terms of illness and disease, to define women’s desire in terms of maternity and reproduction, and to constrain women within the ideology of the domestic ideal. Here too, however, I have considered conduct books, especially those by Sarah Stickney Ellis, which seem to echo the constraints of male writers. However Ellis’s work, I will argue, while never denying women’s “natural illness”, seeks to establish a site of power for women within traditional discourse, by redefining femininity in terms of strength rather than weakness, health rather than illness. Ellis, therefore, while appearing to conform, reutilises this male discourse “for

²⁶ Gaskell’s male narrator in *Cousin Phillis* interprets Phillis’s illness in such conventional terms (Chapter 8). See also Chapter 11, in relation to Braddon’s Lucy Floyd and the convention of love-sickness. In *Adam Bede*, George Eliot writes that the rector’s plain sister Anne “might have had some romantic interest attached to her” if “her chronic headaches could have been accounted for by a pathetic story of disappointed love”, but “no such story had ever been known or invented concerning her”. Eliot, like Braddon but for the opposite purpose, contrasts romantic fictions with “fact” and “prosaic reason”. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859; Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1873) 55.

contrary objectives”, and her work serves as a link between the “authorizing” texts of this section and the women authors in Sections Two and Three.

The concerns to be found in Ellis’s works are issues which reappear again and again in nineteenth-century writing on “the woman question”. In Sections Two and Three I look at a range of novels from the period. I have made my selection for a number of reasons. The production of novels in the period was perceived as being dominated by women. By choosing novels written by women I establish a deliberate contrast with the works by the male “theoreticians” discussed in Section One, since it seems important to see how women writers engaged with the “authorizing” discourses which established cultural norms. I have also looked at works which have not necessarily been part of the literary mainstream, but more marginalized forms, such as non-literary texts in Section One and the sensation novel in Section Three. The disappearance of such works from serious consideration masks their contemporary importance and the wide readership such texts received, and that they were part of the overall multiplicity of discourses producing or redefining the feminine ideal.²⁷

The ideas of “a woman’s mission”, of the nature of women’s work, and of the need for women to find fulfilment through useful employment are to be found in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. In Section Two, I discuss her works and how they engage with the question of women’s subjectivity and sexuality. While it might appear more obvious to look at such issues in the writing of Charlotte Brontë, for example, I have chosen Gaskell because, although the recurrence of illness has been noted in her works, it has not been investigated as

²⁷ See Monica Correa Fryckstedt, *On the Brink: English Novels of 1866*, (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1989) for a discussion of the way in which ideas on the woman question which are claimed to be innovative in Gissing and Hardy, later in the century, are already appearing in now forgotten popular novels of the 1860s.

thoroughly as it has in Brontë's works.²⁸ Moreover, it has been only in the last decade that Gaskell's works have been "canonized" and received critical attention as a literary whole, especially from feminist critics. Prior to this there was a fragmented, disparate approach, her works divided into "industrial" and "provincial" novels, reflecting public and private concerns. I have also chosen to be selective, discussing those novels which centre around a young girl developing through adolescence to womanhood, because in these novels illness figures most prominently. Represented as a period of "decline" which the heroine undergoes, illness is used to expose the dangers inherent in the domestic ideal of femininity.

In Section Three I turn to the dichotomous extremes of the works of Mary Braddon and Charlotte Yonge. Both were best-selling authors, but for widely divergent audiences. I have chosen these authors because their works represent forms marginalized in the literary canon, but in which the subject of women's illness is highly visible. Moreover, the nineteenth-century construction of femininity and masculinity was based upon oppositional extremes and it seems appropriate to look at these two extremes in literary writing. In "popular" literature, subtleties of plot and characterization often disappear, and a fictitious world is produced in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, black and white.²⁹ This has led me to approach these novels in ways other than the close textual analysis I have paid to Gaskell's works. Braddon's two best known novels represent "sensation" fiction, a melodramatic form, which was notorious and categorized in terms of "disease". I look here both at the critical reception of

²⁸ See Chapter 4 for critical comments on illness in Gaskell's novels. For one excellent discussion of illness in Brontë's novels, see Miriam Lynn Bailin, "The Consummation of Debility: Illness and Convalescence in Victorian Fiction", Diss., (U of California, Berkeley, 1987).

²⁹ See Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama", *The Kenyon Review* 10.3 (1948): 431-444, for the hypothesis that melodrama, with its oversimplification into polarities and oppositions, was the characteristic mode of nineteenth-century thought, from Dickens to Marx.

these novels, and at Braddon's subversion of the domestic ideal of femininity, in terms of transgression, the construction of what is natural and unnatural, healthy and diseased. Charlotte Yonge's works, on the other hand, exhibit a moral soundness, as she establishes certain types of good and bad behaviour. Like those of Sarah Ellis, they work within rather than against the dominant ideology of femininity. Nevertheless her novels can be seen as redefining that femininity in terms of strength and health. Illness is used in her novels in a variety of ways, all linked with feminizing her characters and bringing them within the domestic fold.

Part I:
Voices of Authority

Chapter 1

Order and Disorder(s): Illness, medicine and women's sexuality

Man was created independent because destined to govern family, society, and nature; while woman was made dependent, tied to the hearth and home by a long chain of never-ending infirmities, as if to point out the destined sphere where her activity could find more happiness, although paler glory.

Edward Tilt, *On the Preservation of the Health of Women*, 1851.¹

It is the healing of an internal wound which, in the last analysis, generates this whole drama. It follows that in fact for fifteen or twenty days out of twenty-eight (one could say almost perpetually) woman is not only ill but wounded.

Jules Michelet, *L'Amour*.²

One of the first to be "sexualized" was the "idle" woman. She inhabited the outer edge of the "world," in which she always had to appear as a value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1.³

The Hysterization of Women

The growing importance, during the nineteenth century, of medical and scientific discourse transformed, yet at the same time reinforced, the moral prescription of women's spiritual and bodily purity. Both religion and medicine sought to silence the woman's body, expunge excess desire, and keep it under vigilant surveillance and control.⁴ From moral discourse, whether it was

¹ Edward Tilt, *On the Preservation of the Health of Women*, 1851, *Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830-1914*, eds. Pat Jalland and John Hooper (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986) 33.

² Michelet 56-57. The translation is from Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 79.

³ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 121. Further references will, in this chapter, be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

⁴ There is a growing body of writing on the relationship between the medical profession and women in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Anne Digby, "Women's biological straitjacket", *Sexuality and Subversion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) 192-220; Mary Poovey,

religious tract or conduct book, emerged the woman as angel, the spiritual guide, the seemingly assexual mother, confined to the domestic sphere, and whose purpose was the elevation of the minds of her menfolk.⁵ However the vocation of motherhood must not be seen as an evasion of sexuality but as the production of a sexuality focussed on motherhood.⁶ For in the body of the mother lies the paradox of a "silenced" sexuality since reproduction can only take place through an admission of carnality the passionless angel seems to deny.⁷ But the increasing secularization of moral life, through the newly emerging medical, psychological and scientific regulation of "normality", in turn reproduced this figure, at the same time reinscribing the woman's body with new signs, transformed from spiritual to somatic. The body might be silent but it could be read. Physical frailty became not only a sign of greater spirituality, but also the norm for respectable femininity, a norm reinforced by medical discourse. As one writer claimed in 1869, "No woman ever passed through life without being ill. She suffers from 'the custom of women', or she does not. In either case she is normally or abnormally ill. Thus every woman is, according to temperament and other circumstances, always more or less an invalid".⁸ Such an argument

"'Scenes of an Indelicate Character': the Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women", Gallagher and Laqueur 137-168; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1985); Lorna Duffin, "The Conspicuous Consumptive: Woman as an Invalid", Delamont and Duffin 26-55; Janet Oppenheim, *"Shattered Nerves": Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991); Susan R. Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault" *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 1989) 13-31; and Sally Shuttleworth, "Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era", *Body/Politic: Women and the Discourses of Science*, eds. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 47 - 68.

⁵ See chapter 3.

⁶ Mary Jacobus discusses the relationship of maternity, reproduction and sexuality in nineteenth and twentieth century contexts in "In Parenthesis: Immaculate Conceptions and Feminine Desire", Jacobus, Keller and Shuttleworth 13-33.

⁷ For a discussion of passionlessness see Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness" 219-236.

⁸ J. M. Allan, "On The Differences in the Minds of Men and Women", *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 7 (1869): cxcix-cci, Jalland and Hooper 34.

based on the “scientifically” backed “natural” illness of women could be used to marginalize women in society, restrict their role to the domestic sphere, and their sexuality to reproduction. Because they were described as being imprisoned in the inescapable periodicity of their bodies and constantly prey to their delicate nervous systems, women were deemed ineligible for entry into advanced education, and the public masculine spheres of medicine, law, or politics.⁹ Nevertheless it is as well to remember here that sexuality is also the articulation of pleasure, and that what I am dealing with is not the analysis of a simple power relationship based on repressive patriarchal institutions and subjected and oppressed women. According to Foucault, the relations of power-knowledge are not static, but “matrices of transformations” (99), subject to constant modifications and shifts. Power and knowledge come together in discourse, and in the discourses of respectable femininity there were the sites of pleasure - woman’s mission, fulfilment through motherhood - which could provide attractions to women as well as restrictions.

Foucault challenges the idea that there have been repeated attempts to reduce all of sex to its “licit”, married, heterosexual, reproductive form. In defining sexuality as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (103), he posits four great “strategic unities” at work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the deployment of such power. Although, apart from in the fourth, he does not mention women specifically, I would argue that all four concern women in different ways. “A socialization of procreative behaviour” deals with woman’s place in the social economy as (re)producer of the next generation, as the fount of population; “a pedagogization of children’s sex” concerns her position as child/girl; “a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” positions her in a normative role, biologically and psychologically, as a mother;

⁹ For discussion of the debate on higher education, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg 12-27; Anne Digby; Jalland and Hooper; Janet Oppenheim.

and “a hysterization of women’s bodies” appropriates her body as site of a pathologised sexuality (104). With all four of these strategic unities, the medical profession was involved. “Hysterization” took place, according to Foucault, by means of a process in which the feminine body, having been analyzed as being “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (104), took its place both in the medical sphere (because of its intrinsic pathology) and in the social body, that is, in relation to society, the family, and children. In other words, I would argue, the hysterization of women’s bodies went hand in hand with the domestic ideal of femininity.

According to this ideal, women’s sexual desire was subordinate to that of their maternal desire. As a means of control, women’s sexuality was thus transformed into terms of reproduction only. A woman’s body was not subject to but the object of desire, for the pleasure of men, as well as the site of future generations, the source of children. Such self-abnegation was seen as natural in women, part of their moral superiority. But even the reproductive body was pathologized. Philip Martin has described how insanity was found present even in what appeared to be the “safest and sanest haven for women, the period of childbirth and nursing”. He maintains that woman was pathologized in the act that most characterized her difference. There was no real discrimination made in such an ideology, “in terms of the effects they cause, between childbirth and menstruation: both are natural, yet natural causes of pathological conditions which are thus inextricably secured to the natural state of womankind. Women, therefore, are naturally ill”.¹⁰

The ideal of domestic womanhood was produced by and for the middle class, through a paradigm of difference, concerning both gender and class. Woman

¹⁰ Philip Martin, *Mad Women in Romantic Writing* (Sussex: Harvester, 1987) 45.

was different from and complementary to man. As Ruskin wrote, "each has what the other has not: each complements the other, and is complemented by the other: they are in nothing alike".¹¹ It is usually accepted that in class terms, however, the ideal woman was constituted as different from her other, the working-class woman. But paradoxically women's sexuality could be constructed in terms of illness for both middle and working-class women. On the one hand there was the belief that respectable women were inherently weak and delicate, in a constant state of sickness, a belief which reproduced and guaranteed their dependency. On the other stood the representation of working-class women, defined as inherently healthy, hardy and robust. However, as Lynda Nead points out,

the definition of femininity across the notions of sickness and health was extremely contradictory. Although the respectable woman was represented in terms of physical frailty, she was also understood in relation to physical/moral soundness. This contradiction also applied to definitions of the working-class woman who was not only seen as robust and healthy but also as a source of infection and disease.¹²

All women, therefore, in one way or another, were linked with illness.

William Acton

The key figure in the attempt to produce a passive, restricted sexuality for women, or at least the one who is most frequently cited, was William Acton. In 1857 Acton produced two works which concerned women's sexuality: *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, and *Prostitution*.¹³ In both we find a construction of womanhood where the spiritual moral qualities of the

¹¹ Ruskin 87.

¹² Nead 30.

¹³ The latter is dealt with later in this chapter.

passionless, guiding angel are transformed into a natural state. The representative nature of Acton's views on women's sexuality is open to debate. M. Jeanne Peterson has called into doubt Acton's medical qualifications. She states that he never earned the M.D. degree, and claims that his was not a "scientific or scholarly study of sexual experience and disorders" but a book written with popularity in mind, to get his name in print, establish himself as an expert, and to make money "both from the book and the resulting medical practice".¹⁴ Consequently she takes issue with writers on Victorian sexuality such as Stephen Marcus when they claim that Acton's views were close to "official doctrine" in Victorian society.¹⁵ While I would agree with Peterson that works like Acton's must be read in their historical and social context, acknowledging "the social status and ambition of the medical men" and their desire to gain professional success, wealthy patients and official recognition, and that the works should not be seen as the only construction of Victorian sexuality, I would not deny their importance.¹⁶ Peterson attempts to undermine the authority of Acton's work by showing that it is based on "inconsistencies, sexual tale-telling, and scare tactics" and that he wrote the book "to appeal to the widest possible audience, not just of medical men but of lay readers".¹⁷ But such an argument only serves to disguise the problematic nature of "scientific authority" itself. As Foucault has asserted, "the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which comes under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in

¹⁴ M. Jeanne Peterson, "Dr. Acton's Enemy: Medicine, Sex, and Society in Victorian England", *Victorian Studies* 29 (1986): 570 n.5, and 587.

¹⁵ Peterson, "Acton" 570.

¹⁶ Peterson, "Acton" 589.

¹⁷ Peterson, "Acton" 587. Elsewhere Peterson writes that Acton "although he was a licensed medical man" was "a near-quack, perhaps the cleverest quack in London in his generation", 588. Janet Oppenheim, in *Shattered Nerves*, also disputes Acton's views as being representative of Victorian medical opinion, 201-2.

themselves are neither true nor false".¹⁸ Acton's views, "scientific" or "unscientific" as they might have been, were influential. They produced the "effects of truth" and were, according to Frank Mort, "distinctly innovatory, marking important breaks with earlier theories of female sexuality and helping generate an intellectual climate favourable to regulationism", in fact "the highpoint of mid-Victorian distinctions between the asexual bourgeois lady and the sexually depraved working-class prostitute".¹⁹

However, although Acton's description of women's sexuality is frequently made use of to verify this particular view of Victorian womanhood, it is not often discussed in context. As Steven Marcus correctly points out, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* is, in fact, a work concerning men and male sexuality, and women do not figure prominently at all.²⁰ Women are marginalized to the extent that the title of the book is misleading, since there is no discussion of the functions and disorders of women's reproductive organs. The notorious passage on women's sexuality, which I discuss below, occurs in a section on impotence, headed *Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female a Cause of Absence of Virility*. It is, therefore, not so much a statement about women, as about the effect of their sexuality upon men, and as such differs from other comments on women's sexuality elsewhere in the work, although those, too, are usually only in relation to male sexuality.

Acton begins by defending his case, for "so many false ideas are current as to women's sexual condition", ideas that are "so productive of mischief".²¹ His

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972-77*, ed. C. Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980) 118.

¹⁹ See Mort 79.

²⁰ Marcus 13. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society* 39.

²¹ William Acton, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult age, and Advanced Life considered in their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (1st

assurance that his statement is one “that most medical men will corroborate” invokes the solidarity of professional colleagues. He continues, “I should say that the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally” (*Functions*, 208). His conclusion is:

I am ready to maintain that there are many females who never feel any excitement whatever. Others, again, immediately after each period, do become, to a limited degree, capable of experiencing it; but this capacity is often temporary, and may entirely cease till the next menstrual period. Many of the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and of domestic duties, are the only passions they feel. (*Functions*, 209)

This particular construction of women’s sexuality - the fulfilment of desire through motherhood - is produced in a number of ways. Firstly it is depicted as being natural, which implies that any other manifestation of women’s sexuality is unnatural. Acton corroborates his statement with evidence from the animal world: “The physiologist will not be surprised that the human female should in these respects differ but little from the female among animals” (*Functions*, 209). Just as female animals can be approached only at particular seasons, so the human female will feel only occasional sexual desire. What is different in the human female, however, is her desire to please. Central to Acton’s construction of ideal womanhood is the belief in the innate desire for self-abnegation on the part of women, a trait which both reinforces and is reinforced by his construction of women’s sexuality. He maintains, “as a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband’s

embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions", and again:

In many a human female, indeed, I believe, it is rather from the wish of pleasing or gratifying the husband than from any strong sexual feeling, that cohabitation is so habitually allowed. Certainly, during the months of gestation this holds good. I have known instances where the female has during gestation evinced positive loathing for any marital familiarity whatever. In some exceptional cases, indeed, feeling has been sacrificed to duty, and the wife has endured, with all the self-martyrdom of womanhood, what was almost worse than death. (*Functions*, 210)

Another way in which this particular construction of women's sexuality is produced is by the underlying opposition of male strength and female weakness, an opposition of power and submission. For Acton, male sexuality is based in a man's virility, which is an "instinct of propagation" (*Functions*, 73), the most powerful feeling after that of self-preservation. Male sexuality based on power, therefore, is as necessary for a well ordered society as female sexuality based on submission:

This feeling of *virility* is much more developed in man than is that of maternity in woman. Its existence, indeed, seems necessary to give man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler, and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the wellbeing of the family, and through it, of society itself. It is a power, a privilege, of which the man is, and should be, proud. (*Functions*, 73, emphasis in original)

It must be remembered, too, that this particular passage on women's lack of sexual desire is found in the context of a discussion of male impotence, and thus intended to reassure men that women are not to be feared.²² Following his

²² For a discussion of the nightmare quality of Acton's work, sexuality as hell and the universal fear of impotence, see Marcus, 12-33. Marcus describes the book as "a world part fantasy, part nightmare, part hallucination, and part madhouse", 13. On the whole Marcus's analysis of Acton is based on the way in which Acton reflects a certain system of middle-class beliefs, rather than

statement that a woman would rather not endure her husband's attentions Acton continues, "no nervous or feeble young man need, therefore, be deterred from marriage by any exaggerated notion of the arduous duties required from him. Let him be well assured, on my authority backed by the opinion of many, that the married woman has no wish to be placed on the footing of the mistress" (*Functions*, 73).

But it is in statements like this that the underlying tensions of the text are revealed, tensions between natural and unnatural sexuality, for men or for women. For men (and implicitly for women in terms of maternity) Acton sees sexual desire as a natural instinct, and yet, in accepting this he meets problems, for there are times when he believes that the indulgence of sexual passion is to be abhorred. Thus he must differentiate between healthy and unhealthy, natural and unnatural, sexuality. Such an ambivalence can be seen when he insists on the training of young men in self restraint and continence: "not that this natural instinct is to be regarded with a Manichean philosophy as in itself bad. Far from it. That it is *natural* forbids such a theory. It has its own beneficent purpose; but that purpose is not early and sensual indulgence, but *mature and lawful love*" (*Functions*, 11, emphases in the original). There is a similar contradiction in the acceptance that sex is natural and to be expected in marriage, and that a woman can have her marriage nullified because of her husband's impotence, despite the fact that she is said, elsewhere in the text, to have no sexual feeling and not to want a sexual relationship.

In the case of women, although Acton would like to construct a typical, even uniform, sexual behaviour, the use of oppositional terms like "married

the way the text is part of the discursive production of knowledge, the construction of an ideology of sexuality.

woman"/"mistress" shows that women's sexuality is defined not only against men's but also against other women's. Throughout the text there are instances where women's sexual behaviour is shown to be other than the self-abnegating and maternal. These include the girl who masturbates as a child, the woman with animal passions, the nymphomaniac, the woman who suffers because her husband is impotent, and the strong minded lady "who maintains women's rights to the extent that she denied the husband any voice in the matter, whether or not cohabitation should take place" (*Functions*, 211), despite the possibly detrimental effect of her actions on the health of her husband. This kind of behaviour is, however, consistently shown as being "unnatural", and misleading of female sexual behaviour in general, being "the vile aspersions cast on [female nature] by the abandoned conduct and ungoverned lusts of a few of its worst examples" (*Functions*, 209). There is usually the assumption as well that such unnatural behaviour belongs to the lower classes, among "loose, or, at least, low and immoral women". Yet, even here there is the suspicion that women do not feel as great a desire as men, but have other motivation. These women, "though not ostensibly in the ranks of prostitutes, make a kind of trade of a pretty face. They are fond of admiration, they like to attract the attention of those immediately above them" and even amongst those who are found in the "casinos and other immoral haunts" of London there are those "who, if they have no sexual feeling, counterfeit it so well that the novice does not suspect but that it is genuine" (*Functions*, 209). As I will argue elsewhere, Acton's construction of women's sexuality, although it seemed to further the idea of the difference between classes, is often soundly based in the extension of middle-class ideological views of domestic femininity.²³

²³ See below, Chapter 2.

It is as well to reiterate here that Acton's was not the only, or even the majority, view of women's sexuality, but that it is important to take into account because of the pervasiveness and the appeal of the domestic ideal of femininity.²⁴ Even for other medical writers, such as the two whose works are discussed in detail below, who assumed that women experienced sexual desire, such desire is usually less than male desire and also focussed on motherhood. Samuel Ashwell, in discussing diseases of the uterine system, never mentions the way in which such illnesses might interfere with sexual desire or performance, but nevertheless in many cases posits marriage and motherhood as a cure.²⁵ Edward Tilt, in fact, divided women into three categories.²⁶ The first, "many more than is supposed", have little or no sexual feeling, while the second, "more numerous than the preceding, but small when compared to the sum total of the female sex, are more or less tyrannized over by sexual desires, and, if they do not marry, and are unrestrained by religion, education, social fetters, and hygiene, they are likely to go wrong" (Tilt, 128). The third group was made up of "the vast majority of women, in whom the sexual appetite is as moderate as all other appetites" (Tilt, 129). Nevertheless, Tilt declared, "the physiologist views parturition as the climax of female power, as the main object of a woman's existence" (Tilt, 244).

²⁴ See Weeks 40. Also, Carl Degler, "What Ought to be and what was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century", Leavitt 40-47.

²⁵ Samuel Ashwell, *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases Peculiar to Women, Illustrated by Cases, Derived from Hospital and Private Practice*, 3rd ed. (1843; London, 1848). All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the name of the author.

²⁶ Edward Tilt, *A Handbook of Uterine Therapeutics and of Diseases of Women*, 4th ed. (1863; London, 1878). All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the name of the author.

“Diseases Peculiar to Women”

Therefore, if motherhood was the norm, if motherhood was the expression of women's sexuality, how was such a process represented in medical texts? A woman's reproductive cycle, from menarche to menopause, was viewed as a series of pathological states. Most medical texts were not concerned with the normal, healthy, and the unproblematic, but with illness, the dysfunctions and problems of the body. By reading medical texts one would come to the conclusion that, once again, it was “normal” to be ill. In such works, health is marginalized, and illness made central. Works like Samuel Ashwell's *A Practical Treatise on the Diseases Peculiar to Women, Illustrated by Cases, Derived from Hospital and Private Practice*, not only claimed to provide information, but also “to improve and increase the common stock of professional knowledge” (Ashwell, v). Ashwell's book was written for “practical men”, about what has “proved for himself to be true and valuable”. In the production of truth, the will to truth is masked. Throughout, Ashwell's work produces a sexuality for women based around their reproductive function, a reproductive system which is diseased, where the cure for such diseases is marriage and motherhood, although this is itself problematic and the source of further disease.

In medical texts such as Ashwell's, the norm produced is that of the ill woman. Other discourses centred on the ideal of womanhood expressed through reproduction and mothering interacted with medical discourse in the production of the “truth” of women's bodies and sexuality. Their intertextuality is found in the use of common tropes, metaphors and images which naturalized woman's illness. But in the case of medical discourse, the process of naturalization is more complex. It would seem that the purpose of medical discourse would be to construct the ideal healthy woman. Yet this woman

remains curiously absent from the text. The moral viewpoint of medical writers makes their work at once prescriptive of what ought to be (the healthy woman), and at the same time productive of a materiality of woman's sexuality which is based upon the normality of illness. The medical profession works with an institutionalized ambivalence towards the woman's body, a tension reflected in medical discourse. On the one hand its goal is the healthy woman, but she, like all desire, must remain absent, for after all, the profession is reliant upon the ill woman for its *raison d'être*.²⁷ It is in this dichotomy of the healthy and the ill woman, that the extension of surveillance and control over the woman's body can be situated. By monitoring all behaviour by women which is determined as "ill", by defining what is deviant and unnatural, the medical profession can produce an ideal of health which appears beyond the attainment of women.

In these texts, diseases of the reproductive system appear to be all-embracing and their frequency and prevalence mean that disease is the norm. Women are presented as being naturally emotional and so any disorder is connected with the nervous system, as an expression of their femininity.²⁸ For instance Ashwell describes how functional diseases are linked to the uterus, but through no physical signs such as structural change; they are both specific to the uterus and part of the whole female economy, and are often interrelated. Most have some connection with "the derangement of menstruation" (Ashwell, 2), such as chlorosis, amenorrhoea, or dysmenorrhoea. Ashwell states that the functional

²⁷ This fact did not go unnoticed by women critics of the medical profession. In 1873, Mrs E. B. Duffey wrote in her advice book *What Women Should Know*, under the heading "CAN A NATURAL STATE BE CALLED A STATE OF INVALIDISM?", concerning a medical opinion that menstruation brought pain, prostration and disability: "At the first glance I feel that, as a physician, he ought to know better. But on second thoughts I consider that, as a physician, he only knows of the cases of sickness and suffering, for those who do not suffer of course do not need assistance". Jalland and Hooper 53. See also Vern Bullough and Martha Voght, "Women, Menstruation and Nineteenth-Century Medicine", Leavitt, 34, for a discussion of a similar argument made by the American researcher Leta Stetter Hollingworth.

²⁸ Jordanova notes that in the eighteenth century, just as the nervous system was feminized, so the musculature was masculinized, 58.

diseases are "more complicated and less easy to accurate diagnosis than the structural" (Ashwell, 1), and since they exert "an extensive constitutional influence" through the nervous system, it is not a difficult step to diagnose all nervous disorders as being related to the uterus. Ashwell notes that although the local symptoms are usually slight and obscure, the "constitutional derangements ... are severe and extensive" (Ashwell, 3), affecting the nervous, vascular, respiratory, and digestive systems. In Ashwell's definitions of the functional diseases of the uterus the boundaries between the categories of these diseases seem particularly fluid; one leads to another, or seldom appears without the other; it is argued that a certain type of woman is more prone to such diseases; the diseases themselves, by not being organic, are often "proteiform" (Ashwell, 25), take on the appearance of other disorders, and are all linked to the central nervous system. For example, when writing of chlorosis, Ashwell remarks that "the blending of symptoms may perplex the diagnosis. It ought to be remarked, that leucorrhoea in various degrees is an almost constant attendant on chlorosis and amenorrhoea" (Ashwell, 23) and that "it cannot escape notice, that the disease is one of almost universal influence; it is not confined to a particular organ, but affects the entire system" (Ashwell, 24).

Such disorders are so common that their seriousness might be overlooked. Even when a woman thinks she is well, there is the possibility that she does not realise that she is not. For the sufferer of chlorosis, "there are instances, however, where the critical point in the disease may have arrived, before any treatment had been employed. Such maladies are prevalent, and at first present nothing unusual; delicacy of constitution, and imperfect menstruation, are events of every day occurrence" (Ashwell, 14), but "the symptoms already described exist frequently for a long period in a moderate degree" (Ashwell, 15). Edward Tilt insists that menstruation should be treated like an illness:

The knowledge that menstruation is a natural function does mischief; for those who do not suffer during menstruation, will not submit to any restraint being placed upon their usual liberty of action; and those who suffer much will not seek advice, supposing that it is incumbent upon them to bear the pain of a natural function. (Tilt, 426)

Ashwell makes a similar point about menorrhagia: "In healthy women, also, a profuse catamenial discharge, even when it is attended by pain, is often long disregarded, such an event being generally viewed in a favourable light" (Ashwell, 136). Indeed, with this disorder it seems to take a course from which a woman cannot escape:

On the subsidence of the flow she is weak and exhausted, and several days elapse before she regains her usual freshness of countenance and strength of pulse. It is easy to mark the transition from this to the passive form of menorrhagia; for although, at first, the recurrence of the events just now described may not seriously impair the health, yet after a time the loss produces a marked impression on the system. ... Thus the active and acute variety is merged in the passive form of the disease. (Ashwell, 137)

Not only are diseases of the uterine system all-embracing, but they affect all types of women. The medical texts, rather than producing one type, such as the pale, delicate invalid, are productive of a range of ill women, the extremes being the delicate and the robust, as well as married and single, young and old. No woman appears exempt. For instance, Ashwell describes the effects of amenorrhoea: "In a young or middle-aged woman, fleshy or plethoric habit, and ruddy complexion, the immediate suppression of the secretion will be followed by congestion, if not by inflammation; while in a woman delicate, thin, and spare, of sallow aspect, and highly nervous, the more frequent consequences are irritation, attended by spasm and paroxysms of severe pain, with intervals of ease" (Ashwell, 67). Dysmenorrhoea, too, "is not confined to one class of females; the married and the single, particularly the latter, are obnoxious to it. It

prevails among women of irritable temperament, and of delicate, strumous, and phthisical constitutions. The habits of the rich, therefore, by fostering these tendencies, have a direct influence in promoting it. There are examples too, although rare, among women of sanguine temperament" (Ashwell, 102); and for leucorrhoea, "in the young and middle-aged, spare diet, purging, and exercise will generally suffice; but in women of full habit, addicted to the pleasures of the table, this more decided drain is often required" (Ashwell, 182).

When it comes to class difference, however, the texts become more problematic. On the one hand, the diseases are presented as natural to all types of women, no matter what class; but on the other hand, when class is mentioned, it is used either to distinguish more robust working-class women, or to condemn the fashionable lifestyle of upper- and middle-class women. Although working conditions are cited as being a possible contributing factor for diseases like chlorosis, it is noticeable that Ashwell, for example, deals with the diseases almost entirely as a middle and upper class complaints, certainly in most of the recommended non-medicinal cures he gives, and in many of the aggravating causes. In the case of amenorrhoea he provides the specific example of working-class women who are exempt from the disease despite their working conditions which would be likely to induce it. Amenorrhoea could be caused by cold, such as swimming in cold water while menstruating, although "happily the effect of several of these causes is diminished by the frequency of their occurrence. The bathing women go into the sea, during menstruation, with perfect impunity" (Ashwell, 66). There is no suggestion that it might benefit the more delicate middle-class women to do the same. On the contrary the working women are assumed to have tougher, less sensitive constitutions. But, although working women are almost absent from the main text of Ashwell's work, that is, from the general discussions of the diseases and their possible cures, while the condemnation of the idle dissipated lady is much apparent, in the case studies

which end the discussion of each disease, many working-class women appear as patients.²⁹

Edward Tilt, in *A Handbook of Uterine Therapeutics and of Diseases of Women*, is more overt in his construction of class difference, yet his work too contains similar contradictions. All women may suffer from uterine diseases, but there is always a difference between women and ladies. He acknowledges that working-class women might have the same diseases, but they have not necessarily come within his experience, as implied in this passage about the dangers of certain machines:

All instruments worked by foot power, should be forbidden to those who have a tendency to diseases of the sexual organs, and I have often had to forbid the playing of the harmonium to clergymen's wives. Sewing machines worked by the foot are equally objectionable, and the poor women who have to live by working sewing machines with both feet, *are said to be* very liable to dysmenorrhoea, ovaritis, and chronic uterine disease. (Tilt, 70, emphasis added)

Underlying his treatment of diseases is usually the assumption of middle-class money and leisure: "It is always useful, and sufficient in most cases of disease of the womb, to rest on the sofa for two or three hours before or after lunch or early dinner" (Tilt, 68), or "a Hansom cab is the least liable to increase the pelvic pains, so it is fortunate, that fashion no longer forbids its use to ladies" (Tilt, 69). But these assumptions are extended beyond the realm of social and economic position, to the construction of a difference inherent in the women of different

²⁹ See also Karl Figlio, "Chlorosis and Chronic Disease in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Social Constitution of Somatic Illness in a Capitalist Society", *Women and Health, the Politics of Sex in Medicine*, ed. Elizabeth Fee (Farmingdale, New York: Baywood, 1983) 213-241, for a discussion both of chlorosis as a disease represented as middle-class but suffered by working-class women, and the relationship of medicine, disease and society.

classes themselves. In his advice to practitioners, Tilt discusses the etiquette of performing “so disagreeable a necessity” as an internal examination of a patient:

It has been often stated that we should always insist on the presence of a third party, whenever we examine a married woman. I have taken a different estimate of women’s sense of honour, and, during a long course of practice, have never had to repent having done so. ... The amount of confidence shown by women to the profession, in this respect, varies extremely, but I may safely say that it is greatest in proportion to their rank and mental culture; for while the lower orders have not this delicate perception of implicit trust, the higher not only feel that they can rely on the honour of gentlemen, but are generally of opinion, that it is sufficiently painful to submit to an examination, without having the additional annoyance of its being witnessed, even by a mother. (Tilt, 17-18)

There are many points at issue in this passage, beside that of class. A woman’s sexuality is not to be considered so much in relation to the woman herself, as for its wider implications, and overall, there is a degree of ambivalence about the nature of that sexuality. On the one hand it is dangerous, because women might be unscrupulous, and Tilt openly states that there is danger to the practitioner’s reputation. He “must bear in mind, that to become an object of interest, is an innate and characteristic feeling of the female mind” (Tilt, 18). As well, in this situation of intimacy there is an implied threat not only to the patient, in the violation of her body, but also to her husband, because the doctor has seemingly usurped his place and his rights (there is no discussion of the examination of a single woman). The possibility of male desire is defused and displaced on to the woman. Her sexuality becomes a matter of shame, to be silenced and hidden from the gaze of witnesses. The masked recognition of the erotic dangers of the situation leaves its trace in the “sense of honour” and “implicit trust” the text insists upon. Thus the constraint of modesty, constructed as an innate quality of the middle-class woman with her delicacy of perception, was one way of curbing these hidden dangers. Similar objections were made to the use of the speculum, with the underlying fear of an excessive

female sexuality, which need be constrained in terms of modesty and femininity.

Robert Ferguson wrote:

The speculum, therefore, cannot be dispensed with in genuine structural disease demanding topical treatment; but *its use crushes so much of all that is feminine*, that I know no measure which so imperatively compels an honest answer to the question, "Would you, under existing circumstances, resort to this expedient, were the patient your daughter, sister, or wife?" That answer must be left to each man to make before his own conscience, and justify to society by his scientific attainments.³⁰

For Sally Shuttleworth, the controversy over the use of the speculum serves to draw attention "to the ways in which the rising medical industry devoted to investigating female diseases created and confirmed its object, establishing on medical authority that a majority of the female population of England was in a state of pathological disorder".³¹

In medical texts diseases specific to women were not only frequent and all-embracing, but were ascribed to moral as well as physical causes. Thus the norms of good health are made dependent on proper behaviour, constraining women within a certain social code. These constraints concern all aspects of a woman's life, physical, psychological and emotional. For example, when Edward Tilt describes menstruation, he draws on traditional discourses and reinscribes older moral beliefs. In Tilt's text the received "fact" that woman is inherently sinful, proven by her suffering through childbirth, becomes new medical knowledge. According to Tilt, menstruation should be a time of suffering, even when unattended by pain: "To dash the pride of beauty, by the sense of shame, the

³⁰ Robert Ferguson, "Prefatory Essay" to Robert Gooch, *On Some of the Most Important Diseases Peculiar to Women, with other papers* (London, 1859) xxxi, emphasis added; see also Poovey, "Scenes" 137-168, for a discussion of similar issues in the debate about the use of chloroform in childbirth.

³¹ Shuttleworth, "Female Circulation" 63.

perfection of womanhood has been made to depend on a monthly blood-flow, that cripples activity for several days, even when unattended by pain or other morbid symptoms" (Tilt, 244). Shame, as with modesty, could be a powerful control over excessive female desire.

The Chlorotic Girl

Chlorosis, or green sickness, a form of anaemia frequent among adolescent girls, was another area open to moral judgement. As a disease it reached its peak in the nineteenth century, and, like hysteria, can be seen in part as a social construction. For if women's sexuality was related solely to her reproductive capacity, puberty, the time of the onset of that reproductive function, was particularly important. Many of the symptoms and causes given to chlorosis appear to relate more to what at a later date might be ascribed to the general changes and attitudes of adolescence, as well as producing the object of the chlorotic girl. As Joan Jacob Brumberg writes, "the symptoms of disease never exist in a cultural vacuum. Even in a strictly biomedical illness, patient responses to physical discomfort and pain are structured in part by who the patient is, the nature of the care giver, and the ideas and values at work in that society".³² She would maintain that "expressions of physical anguish and mental stress are selected quite unconsciously from a repertoire of symptoms that we learn simply by being part of a culture. Put another way, even when an illness is organic, being sick is a social act".³³ Nineteenth-century medical discourse, while positing the possibility of the healthy girl, at the same time transformed a range of behaviours into signs of illness.

³² Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1988) 164.

³³ Brumberg 5.

Samuel Ashwell described chlorosis as "a peculiar affection of the general health; in which debility, languor, and deranged stomachic functions are prominent symptoms" (Ashwell, 7). The patient may hitherto have been "delicate, but without any marked disease. Now apprehension is excited, from the gradual but evident decline in health, in connexion either with the entire or partial absence of menstruation. She does not pass into womanhood" (Ashwell, 8); that is, she does not fulfil the proper role ascribed to her. The chlorotic young woman has some similarities to the stereotypic romantic heroine. "Such a patient is languid, soon fatigued, and therefore inactive; she is not cheerful, but dull and listless; sometimes perverse and sullen, and prone to solitude" (Ashwell, 8). Although somatic symptoms are given, such as headaches, palpitation of the heart, constipation, or yellow complexion, the causes of chlorosis are especially marked by moral judgement. They are environmental as well as physical and psychological: "A damp, cold, and marshy locality, insufficient and unnutritious [*sic*] food, *the late hours and excitement of fashionable life*, the sedentary employments of the poor in crowded and ill-ventilated factories" (Ashwell, 9, emphasis added), all predispose to this disease, as well as "unrequited affection, attachments opposed by relatives, separation from family and friends, or the sadness occasionally induced by being sent to or detained at school" (Ashwell, 10).³⁴ In fact the causes are so generalized: "whatever relaxes and enfeebles the system at any period of life, and especially at an early age," and "circumstances which depress the mind and keep the feelings in a state of painful suspense or delay" (Ashwell, 10), that one wonders that any young girl escaped the disease at all.³⁵ The patient is often judged on

³⁴ Ashwell's description of chlorosis, its symptoms and causes, are remarkably similar, to almost the same wording, as those given by Dr. Michael Ryan, in *A Manual of Midwifery*, (4th ed. 1841, 338-9) and Walter Johnson, in *The Morbid Emotions of Women*, (1850, 49-50). Johnson, in fact, is quoting a Dr. Copland, and this may well be the common source. Jalland and Hooper 89-92.

³⁵ Ashwell at this point mentions tantalizingly that "chlorosis is occasionally met with in the male sex, and I certainly have seen one or two well marked instances of it" (Ashwell, 10), without explaining how this can occur if it is so closely related to the onset of menstruation.

psychological, closely related to moral, grounds: Ashwell writes "from the want of this caution, I have witnessed very injurious consequences, the practitioner having forgotten, what in female disease it is peculiarly important to remember, that severity of pain, and rapidity of pulse, are generally the indications of irritability and excitement, not inflammation" (Ashwell, 13). Throughout his work Ashwell uses both "irritability" and "irritation" in similar contexts, and it is often unclear whether he is talking of a medical condition, such as the irritation, rather than the inflammation, of the uterus, or the psychological and emotional condition of the patient. The implication results, therefore, that the two are related, even causally.

Older women, too, are not exempt from the moral causes of illness; in fact, Ashwell implies that it is fashionable to be ill. In discussing "the disorders attendant on the decline of menstruation", he comments: "It has become too general an opinion, that the decline of this function must be attended by illness; but this is surely an error, for there are healthy women who pass over this time without any inconvenience, and many whose indisposition is both transient and slight. That this does not more constantly happen arises from the fact, that nature and health are often sacrificed to fashion and luxury" (Ashwell, 196). The healthy woman, therefore, appears to be a rarity, and certainly not the norm. Fashionable life is singled out especially as an area of excessive behaviour which must be constrained. "A patient, suffering from habitual leucorrhoea, without organic disease, should not sleep on a soft bed, nor frequent heated rooms and crowded assemblies. The excitement of music, the theatre, and late hours, should be exchanged for country air and exercise, moderate riding on horseback, and the simpler habits and scenes of rural life" (Ashwell, 182).

As with symptoms and causes of disease, suggested cures are also produced with a certain moral ideal in mind. One form of cure is constructed around the

opposition of (diseased) city life and (healthy) country life. There is no doubt that this was founded on good scientific reasoning. Victorian cities were far from healthy places to live.³⁶ But this particular argument is not peculiar to medical discourse. It can be found elsewhere, as a trope in literary texts or conduct books, for example, carrying the same moral implications. Life in the city appears as “unnatural”, while that in the country is “natural”. According to Ashwell, a “change of air, a residence in the country, and more natural and out-of-door avocations, seem, by their combined influence, to lead for the development of puberty, and subsequently of menstruation and good health” (Ashwell, 15) of the chlorotic girl. Of course, though Ashwell gives examples of working-class patients, these cures often require the necessity of middle-class means, and it is against society life that he most often contrasts healthy country living:³⁷

It is not my intention elaborately to comment upon certain great mistakes in the physical education of female youth. And yet I must be excused if I direct attention to the diet, air, exercise, and clothing of the sex. It will be readily granted, that if, in these particulars, there is extensive deviation from the dictates of nature and common sense, there must be a proportionate risk of debility and disease. In our changeable climate, it behoves the guardian of female youth to be especially prudent; and I am one of those who think, that it is scarcely possible to study these matters too closely. If the national practices in these particulars could be changed - and the remark applies with great force to the middle and higher classes of society living in cities and towns - chlorosis, imperfect puberty and amenorrhoea would be uncommon, instead of being, as they now are, extremely prevalent diseases. (Ashwell, 16)

³⁶ See, for example, Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Life in Victorian Britain* (London: Dent, 1983).

³⁷ The most obvious example of the cure beyond the means of the working class was the visit to the spa, “a sea-voyage, travelling abroad, the air of the sea-coast, foreign and domestic chalybeate spas and iron, constant exercise out of door, living, in fact, in the open air, are the measures on which we must principally rely” (Ashwell, 181). Sometimes this recommendation is given with incongruous effect: “As there were decided symptoms of chlorosis and a feeble pulse, I ordered small doses of iron, an improved diet, and a visit to Tonbridge Wells” (Ashwell, 100).

This passage is not only concerned with the city/country opposition, or the unnatural/natural, but leads on to wider issues. Medical practice was no longer just treating specific illnesses or confined to the site of the individual body, but ranged (despite disclaimers) over matters of the behaviour of that body - its diet, exercise, clothing, and location. It was involved with the production of particular norms of behaviour, with the surveillance and control of the body, and in this case, with the production of a norm of sexual development for young women. The female uterine economy, therefore, was related to "national practices" of social and economic importance. The reproductive health of young women was vital for the reproduction of "the middle and higher classes of society". As a result, the chlorotic, and her sister the hysteric, were viewed with suspicion, and their behaviour was seen to be particularly problematic and often interrelated.³⁸ In Ashwell's text, "the attendant evils" of chlorosis are not only physical. "The mind, the disposition, the temper, are all disturbed. Gloom and despondency, ennui, irritability, and dissatisfied feeling, often exert an irresistible control over such patients. ... Seclusion and solitary habits are frequently indulged, and require *the watchfulness and penetration of the physician and family*" (Ashwell, 17, emphasis added). Yet such symptoms are so broad and general that they classify as deviant and aberrant any behaviour which does not comply with the ideal feminine norm, as constructed, in absentia, by Ashwell.

Marriage as Health

The production of a certain ideal of femininity, based on motherhood, is also present in the other major cure for diseases of the reproductive order - marriage. Medical texts such as those by Ashwell and Tilt, did not just re-enforce an

³⁸ Ashwell, for instance, links the two: "already, at page 25, many circumstances of mismanagement in the physical and moral education of female youth, inducing chlorosis, are pointed out; and these also favour hysteria" (Ashwell, 220).

existing social and economic institution, or reflect a pre-existing situation, but formulated a reality of women's sexuality confined to a woman's reproductive role. According to these texts, it is natural for a woman to fulfil her desires through marriage and motherhood, and, therefore, be confined to the domestic sphere. As J. M. Allan stated very forcefully, using the combined legitimating authority of nature and the Bible:

Woman's instinct and wishes do not lead her in the purely intellectual direction. Her pleasures and duties are widely distinct from those of man. She is content, in most instances, to let others think for her, and trusts to that faculty, where she is really superior - her intuition - to discover the most proper person to do so. Nature has declared, in language which cannot deceive, that woman's chief mission is maternity. Woman craves to be a mother, knowing that she is an imperfect undeveloped being, until she has borne a child. There is a grand physiological truth expressed in the pathetic words of Rachel to Jacob: "Give me children, or else I die".³⁹

Marriage was, of course, upheld for social, economic and moral reasons, but what is silent in such a "cure" is the role played by the sexual act itself. Marriage and motherhood would, presumably, include sex.⁴⁰ By promoting marriage as a cure, the doctor was enabling the woman both to participate in the act which she was not supposed to desire, as well as to fulfil her desires through motherhood. Ashwell, for example, quotes leading experts on chlorosis:

It frequently happens that by stimulating the nervous system of these chlorotic patients *by the physical and moral emotions of matrimony*, we produce a more natural complexion and colour of the whole cutaneous surface, ... and in proportion as the anaemia disappears under the influence of *this new modification of the nervous system*, the whole train of diseased action ... together with

³⁹ J. M. Allan, "On The Differences in the Minds of Men and Women", *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London* 7 (1869): cxcix-cci, Jalland and Hooper 35.

⁴⁰ Even today, sexual stimulation and orgasm are said to ease dysmenorrhea. See, for example, Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies Ourselves: A Health Book by and for Women*, English ed. Angela Phillips and Jill Rakusen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) 172.

all the strange nervous symptoms ... gradually subside and eventually vanish ... (Ashwell, 12, emphases added).

Indeed, in many of the case studies which he uses to show the success of his treatment, marriage is not only the answer, but also the reward: "It is unnecessary to say more of this patient, than that by a sedulous prosecution of the remedial measures, she entirely recovered, is now married, and the mother of two children" (Ashwell, 53). Yet there is not to be found the easy opposition between an unhealthy spinsterdom and healthy married life. Once again illness could be all-encompassing: "*Marriage* frequently cures chlorosis and amenorrhoea: yet its good effects are not certain and invariable; nor is it uncommon to witness the aggravated forms of the malady in married life" (Ashwell, 30, emphasis in original).

Edward Tilt, writing two decades later, described marriage as a tonic because it brought two ingredients necessary to health - activity and the stimulus of success:

For women, marriage means success, and as our social state prevents the marriage of thousands of healthy, blooming women, it follows that they continue to perform their part in the routine of daily duties, while the canker of disappointment is sapping their strength. In marriage, considered as a tonic, we must take into account this mental satisfaction of success, the emotional stimulus of affection given and returned, the physiological stimulus of matrimonial intercourse on the whole frame, and the complete change of circumstances in which the bride is placed. (Tilt, 116)

Nevertheless the marriage had to be undertaken prudently to ensure good health. There is the implication that sexual activity might be detrimental to health in a passage ostensibly concerned with honeymoon plans: "nothing is more likely to intensify any uterine disposition *that may be caused by marriage*, than the insane plan of starting immediately after a wedding for Paris or Rome.

After the excitements and great fatigues that precede marriage, and *the shock it gives the system of a woman*, perfect rest, in the new home for a few weeks, would be the most rational course to follow" (Tilt, 110, emphases added). In fact, the text is contradictory at several points, and in the end, once again, women, married or single, cannot avoid illness. A statement like "unless, in the absence of sexual desires, women are called to a conventual life, by very strong religious feelings, I believe celibacy to be a very fruitful source of disease" (Tilt, 426), is followed on the next page by "although a preventive of uterine disease, marriage may nevertheless produce it, in various ways, if not judiciously ordered" (Tilt, 427). As Mary Poovey writes: "even if a woman did not bear children, her capacity to do so dictated her health - or rather her lack of health".⁴¹

Hysteria

And so, we are always led back to Foucault's hypothesis of the pathologizing of women's sexuality through what he terms "the hysterization of women's bodies". Of all the uterine disorders, hysteria is the most complex and has incited the most interest. According to Ilza Veith, the manifestations of hysteria tended to change from era to era as much as the beliefs concerning the causes and methods of treatment. Its symptoms "were conditioned by social expectancy, tastes, mores, and religion, and were further shaped by the state of medicine in general and the knowledge of the public about medical matters".⁴² I would argue, however, that it was, therefore, a socially constructed disease, whose etiology, symptoms, and cure changed with the production of knowledge, especially by the medical profession, a knowledge centred on a construction of women's sexuality as reproduction. Where Veith argues that "throughout

⁴¹ Poovey, "Scenes" 145.

⁴² Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1965) 209.

history the symptoms were modified by the prevailing concept of the feminine ideal", I see a far more complex relationship between disease and discourse. Medical discourse produced an ideal of femininity which in turn redefined and transformed social behaviour.⁴³ Hysteria, linked etymologically to the uterus, peaked in the late nineteenth century, when "concurrent with its proliferation, which reached almost epidemic proportions, the malady exhibited a diminution in severity, and the disabling symptoms gave way to the faintings, whims, and tempers so elegantly designated as the vapors".⁴⁴ It was therefore an "elegant" disease, which in itself has connotations of class, and Veith's use of the terms "whims" and "tempers" reflects in turn some of the ambivalence of the medical writers to the disease. Although the major writing on hysteria was produced later in the century by men such as Charcot in France, and then Freud, already the earlier writings of Ashwell and Tilt expressed the uneasiness felt in relation to the disease.⁴⁵

Feminist writers have looked at the figure of the hysteric and her relationship to the disease, the medical profession and the patriarchal order, and have posited various theories for this uneasiness. The hysteric has taken on the signification of the rebellious woman, either as the site of frustration at the social and cultural roles she is expected to enter, or of subversion of an oppressive social order by means of the exaggeration of the ideals produced by that order, a mimicry of the ideals of femininity.⁴⁶ As Elizabeth Grosz writes, "the hysteric's

⁴³ Veith 209.

⁴⁴ Veith 210.

⁴⁵ Hysteria, for Freud, signified the conversion of unconscious sexual desire into physical symptoms, producing a body language for the expert (doctor or psychoanalyst) to read. In Freudian terms desire was still produced in the framework of sexuality as reproduction, feminine desire conflated with maternal desire. In the Oedipal situation, a woman's desire is "subsumed under the sign of the daughter's unconscious desire for a child by the father", while masculine desire is "to turn a woman into a mother". Jacobus, "In Parenthesis" 17.

⁴⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman" 197-221.

defiance through excess, through *overcompliance*, is a parody of the expected".⁴⁷ Catherine Clément, on the other hand, treats the hysteric in a more mythic fashion. She posits two figures of rebellion, the sorceress and the hysteric, who embody the feminine role, a role which is "ambiguous, antiestablishment, and conservative at the same time".⁴⁸ The centre of the focus of the gaze of men, inquisitors or doctors, the sorceress and the hysteric provide a spectacle which Clément links to paganism, celebration and madness, that which is both excessive and destabilizing of established order, but also historically repressed.⁴⁹ The two figures, therefore, can be taken to represent the range and variety of female experience through time, marginalized by and yet central to the symbolic order, as well as, through what Clément sees as their bisexuality, anticipating an impossible future when the constraints they embody - "the hysteric, metaphor of the petite bourgeoisie, is a prisoner; the sorceress, metaphor of the people, is a prisoner" - are freed and this new bisexual figure can take flight.⁵⁰ Foucault echoes these two figures when he writes "nervous illness is certainly not the truth of possession, but the medicine of hysteria is not unrelated to the earlier direction of 'obsessed' women" (117). For Foucault, the hysterization of woman found its anchorage point in the "'nervous' woman" (121), the negative image of the Mother, who in turn constituted the most visible form of that hysterization. The mother is, I would point out, also central to the domestic ideal of femininity.

All of these theories see the hysteric as complicit in her own disease, albeit unconsciously, and it is this conflation of the patient and her disease that is present in the medical writings of men such as Ashwell and Tilt. When

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 135, emphasis in the original; Grosz's discussion of hysteria is in relation to Freud and the theories of Luce Irigaray.

⁴⁸ Cixous and Clément 5.

⁴⁹ Although she does not refer to it directly, Clément's description of the "mythology of celebration" (Cixous and Clément 22) is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnival".

⁵⁰ Cixous and Clément 86.

Ashwell writes concerning hysteria, the text consistently discloses the hostility and suspicion of the medical man towards that disease. Hysteria, besides being a "proteiform malady" (Ashwell, 214), takes on a life of its own, is deceptive, deliberately trying to escape recognition through disguising its symptoms; is elusive of the reading of its signs by the physician as detective, the one who will interpret and discover the truth of the disease.⁵¹ Thus it is described as "an assemblage of symptoms, generally in paroxysmal form, simulating many and opposite diseases", and "it leaves, if any, very slight traces of its existence after death" (Ashwell, 209). For Tilt, hysteria is characterized by mutability, because this is "characteristic of women - '*La donna è mobile.*'" (Tilt, 123). He links hysteria and uterine disease and finds it unjustifiable to dismiss a case as just hysteria, for the patient continues to suffer. Even so, the examples he gives, of hysterical back or hysterical knee, though the cause is eventually linked to the uterus, are indications of the way in which hysteria is duplicitous and disguises its symptoms elsewhere in the body. In this way "it becomes apparent, that hysteria has been to the medical adviser, a 'will o' the wisp,' misdirecting his attention from the real source of the nervous symptoms, which might have have been once cured with comparative ease, but have become deeply rooted in a debilitated constitution" (Tilt, 124). Ashwell cites another authority:

"... hysteria is not more remarkable for its frequency, than for the numerous forms under which it appears, resembling part of all the distempers wherewith mankind are afflicted: for in whatever part

⁵¹ In a similar context, concerning chlorosis, Ashwell uses this metaphor: "This may be viewed as the clue by which the intricacies of the symptoms may be unravelled" (Ashwell, 26). Chlorotics as well were viewed with distrust when they refused to eat, a sign also of hysteria. Ashwell writes, "I am aware that families and medical men are occasionally deceived on this point; but I am also persuaded, that in many instances where I have been consulted, there was no fraud, the patients not having obtained food surreptitiously" (Ashwell, 16); "It is unwise and unkind to express a suspicion of this sort, without some tolerable proof" (Ashwell, 17). These eating disorders are also to be seen in anorexia nervosa, not "discovered" until the late 1860s, and the same suspicion was manifest. Brian Turner discusses the emergence of the disorder in *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984,) 183. For feminist analyses of anorexia see especially Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*; also Bordo, "The Body", and Susan R. Bordo, "Reading the Slender Body", in Jacobus, Keller and Shuttleworth 83-112.

of the body it be seated, it immediately produces such symptoms as are peculiar thereto; so that unless a physician be a person of judgment and penetration, he will be mistaken, and suppose such symptoms to arise from some essential disease of this or that particular part, and not from the hysteric passion". (Ashwell, 214)

Hysteria is a passion excessive of the female sexual economy, brought on by "illness, domestic trials, or a severe disappointment in love", "disappointed affection and delayed marriage ... complicated with excitement of the sexual system" (Ashwell, 213). It is therefore linked to sexual feeling and the construction of women's sexuality expressed through reproduction by being connected with the uterus, and other functional diseases of that organ.⁵² Other writers were more overt than Ashwell in linking hysteria to excesses in women's behaviour. Dr Michael Ryan, for example, wrote:

The most frequent causes of hysteria are an excessive sensibility, or irritability of the uterus, the abuse of venereal pleasure, strong and frequent emotions, voluptuous conversations, the perusal of licentious works, frequenting balls, theatres, dances, everything that excites the general sensibility, and especially that of the genital organs, disorders of menstruation, masturbation, privation of sexual commerce after it has been long enjoyed, and chronic inflammation of the uterus or ovary. These diseases influence not only the brain and the uterus, but all other parts of the body.⁵³

And an even more virulent, one might say hysterical, condemnation of the causes of hysteria, in which a certain way of life appears as contagious as the disease, and the disease is portrayed as a malevolent force, was made by Walter Johnson:

⁵² Nevertheless Ashwell, once again, views the disease as all encompassing, for he states "hysteria attacks women perfectly free from uterine derangement" (Ashwell, 212), and has seen "marked instances of the affection in susceptible, but otherwise healthy males" (Ashwell, 209). Tilt also would acknowledge hysteria in men, but is far more specific than Ashwell in its causes, linking it once again to deviant and feminine sexuality, being found in those men "who have given themselves up to masturbation" or "who, after having been accustomed to sexual intercourse, have, by a sense of duty, successfully restrained strong desire during a protracted courtship" (Tilt, 119). These men are those "whose nervous systems are built on the feminine type" (Tilt, 121).

⁵³ Dr Michael Ryan, *A Manual of Midwifery*, 4th ed. (1841) 400-4, Jalland and Hooper 98.

But the grand cause of hysteria - that which puts out the eyes and lames the limbs, and distorts the features of the young and beautiful; that which prompts the canine bark, obstructs the breath, and wrings the brow with anguish; that which melts the women of England into powerless babes, lulls them into months of slumber, deforms the moral beauty of their souls, and shatters their intellect; that which stretches them moaning and struggling on the ground, or petrifies them into living statues; that which will sometimes freeze every faculty of soul and sense, and, by destroying reason, level them with those that chew the cud - this traitor and foe to humanity is Polite Education. First, the boarding-school, then the saloon, the theatre, the opera - *these are the focus of infection, the very den of hysteria*. At school, the unhealthy confined life, the premature tasking of the mental powers, that excessive application to music, lay the foundation which is consolidated upon the young lady's entrée into society.⁵⁴

Hysteria is therefore also constructed in terms of class difference, but here more ambiguously, for whereas the middle-class woman could suffer hysteria because of her excess of feminine sensibility, the working-class woman might through her excess of sexual passion. Tilt maintained that "we moreover know that, although a disease of every climate and social condition, hysteria is most frequent in women of the upper classes of the civilized races, in whom emotionalism is intensified, at the expense of reason and self-control" (Tilt, 121). Thomas Laycock, on the contrary, acknowledged that while working-class women did suffer from hysteria, the women he focuses upon seemed to be those employed in what might be called "fashionable" trades, such as seamstresses and lace-workers, as well as "others of the female population of large towns, confined for many hours daily at sedentary employments, or in heated manufactories; and who, from associating in numbers, excite each other's passions".⁵⁵

⁵⁴Walter Johnson, *The Morbid Emotions of Women* (1850) 227, emphasis added, Jalland and Hooper 101.

⁵⁵ Thomas Laycock, *A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women* (1840) 209-11, Jalland and Hooper 96. By calling these trades "fashionable" I do not intend to deny the very poor working conditions of many engaged in such trades. It is interesting that Laycock's own recommended "cure" was for such women to find more "suitable and profitable", and indeed more upwardly mobile,

In texts such as these, once again, certain behaviour by women, seen as excessive of true femininity, was pathologized. After all it was an expression of femininity to show sensibility and emotion. But with hysteria, something else again was produced. Hysteria appeared to be contagious: "we must observe that nervous affections are catching".⁵⁶ "If several women or girls are together when alarmed, the occurrence of a fit in one of them is almost certain to be the signal for its immediate commencement in many others".⁵⁷ To this author it is the effect of attention that brings on hysteria, and in this we see another aspect of hysteria not necessarily there in other uterine diseases. For the suspicion of the disease is extended to the patient, who is also likely to deceive. For Ashwell, one kind of hysteric seizure occurs "in individuals of highly susceptible temperament, who have long suffered from the disease, and who are, *or think they are*, the subjects of especial troubles" (Ashwell, 213, emphasis added). The hysteric is not to be trusted. There is always the possibility that she is lying, manipulating, or overreacting to unimportant matters, in fact bearing out the stereotypic characteristics of the misogynistic view of women. Ashwell comments on "most hysteric paroxysms, which in some women occur so often, and from such trivial causes, as scarcely to excite attention: they but slightly impair the general health, and are so much under the control of the will, that they may be postponed or induced nearly at the pleasure of the individual" (Ashwell, 211). The hysteric, therefore, is said to control the disease rather than the disease controlling her.

employment, such as designing patterns for calico-printers, or as shop assistants for booksellers, drapers, or haberdashers, and this would improve both their health and their morals.

⁵⁶ E. J. Tilt, *Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene* (1852) 255, Jalland and Hooper 100.

⁵⁷ Robert B. Carter, *On the Influence of Education and Training in preventing Diseases of the Nervous System* (1855) 219, Jalland and Hooper 101.

Medical texts then, while ostensibly purporting to be scientific studies for the professional medical man or useful guides for the lay reader seeking information, were also about control. They were not produced in isolation, but drew upon other discourses, traditional and contemporary. In the use of certain familiar tropes, such as those concerning the domestic ideal of femininity, they re-inforced and re-produced that ideal, and in turn gave scientific "truth" to its appearance elsewhere, in the complex interweaving of discourses which produces ideologies of gender and class. Women's sexuality, for middle or working-class women, was constructed in medical texts in terms of disease. Whether woman's desire was perceived as "sexual" or "maternal", both representations were linked to a uterine economy; women's role was reproductive, her sphere of activity domestic, and her life a series of "natural" illnesses.

Chapter 2

"Sisters by the Fireside": Prostitution, Disease, and the Domestic Ideal

There is in the warm fond heart of woman a strange and sublime unselfishness, which men too commonly discover only to profit by, - a positive love of self-sacrifice, - an active, so to speak, an *aggressive* desire to show their affection, by giving up to those who have won it, something they hold very dear.

W. R. Greg, "Prostitution", 1850.¹

"Oh, I'm a seduced milliner," she said, rather impatiently; "anything you like".

Lushing Lucy, talking to Bracebridge Hemyng in "Prostitution in London", 1861.²

There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1.³

Prostitution was regarded in the nineteenth century as "the Great Social Evil" and the subject of ongoing debate. Judith Walkowitz has traced the developments of this debate and how writing early in the century, by congregational ministers, temperance and moral reformers, evangelical physicians, and Owenite socialists, who investigated the causes, results and range of prostitution, as a threat to the sanctity of the family and to the social order, set the tone for future discourse. "As a consequence", she writes, "the innovative analyses of the 1840s would later crystalize into the conventional wisdom of subsequent decades".⁴ While the earlier writers engaged in a criticism of the class system which they claimed produced prostitution, later writers did not, since

¹ [W. R. Greg] "Prostitution", *Westminster Review* 53 (1850): 459, emphasis in original.

² Bracebridge Hemyng, "Prostitution in London" *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Conditions and Earnings of THOSE THAT WILL WORK, THOSE THAT CANNOT WORK, AND THOSE THAT WILL NOT WORK*, Vol. IV, "Those that will not work", Henry Mayhew (1861-2; London: Frank Cass, 1967) 224.

³ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 27.

⁴ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 32. See also Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

they were more concerned with the introduction or extension of regulations to control prostitution, as exemplified in the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. Such controls, nevertheless, should not be seen as the repression of sexuality, but as, in Foucault's phrase, "a 'police' matter", "not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourse" (25). Like medical writings, the debate on prostitution constituted part of the great speaking forth on sexuality in the nineteenth century, for, in the process of defining and regulating "prostitution", these discourses were also producing a "truth" of normative sexual behaviour.

Two of those engaged in this debate in the mid-nineteenth century were the Manchester businessman, essayist and Unitarian W. R. Greg, and the physician William Acton. Judith Walkowitz claims that "by looking at the social basis of prostitution, investigators [like Greg and Acton] had tried to "humanize" the prostitute and to respond seriously to popular criticism of the sexual exploitation of working-class women".⁵ I would maintain that in these texts the women are not only "humanized" but also "domesticated", brought within the bounds of middle-class domestic femininity. The two terms are of course related, since within the dominant ideological framework, to be "human", and thus to appear "natural", was to conform to middle-class behaviour, which, for women, was according to the domestic ideal. Linda Mahood argues that the debate on prostitution, and its institutionalization through moral reform, magdalene homes, and the attempted restitution of the "fallen woman", was part of an ongoing "proletarianization" of working-class women.⁶ The debate, according to Mahood, was a discourse of colonization, which "defined certain women as 'prostitutes' who would have not defined their own behaviour as prostitution",

⁵ Walkowitz 39.

⁶ Mahood 156.

and reform asylums were designed to socialize the inmates “to conform to middle-class codes of class and gender”.⁷ Thus in traditional historical terms the debate can be seen primarily as a means both of highlighting the plight of working-class women and of increasing the surveillance and control over those women’s lives. In this chapter, however, I will not look at the historical results of the debate on prostitution, but at the interplay of ideological constructs in the texts themselves. In an analysis of the production of sexualities, the debate was important not only for the construction of working-class woman’s sexuality, but also for the problems that it raised about the sexuality of all women. It had profound implications for class and gender, when that sexuality was linked to concepts of disease and illness.

The predominant metaphor concerning prostitution in the nineteenth century was that of disease and pollution.⁸ For Foucault, the middle classes were concerned above all with their own survival, with “the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that ‘ruled’” (123). In light of this, debate on sanitation and prostitution, which had been interpreted as showing concern about the poverty, ill-health, and disease found in working-class living conditions and their effect on the working classes themselves, can now be viewed as the fear of the spread of contagion and disease to the healthy classes, as well as the undermining of the middle-class family and thus the reproduction of the next generation. Such metaphors were used widely in the three texts on prostitution which I discuss, W. R. Greg’s anonymous article in the *Westminster Review*, 1850, William Acton’s *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, 1858, (both of

⁷ Mahood 102.

⁸ The other dominant metaphor, with which I am not primarily concerned here, was that of commerce, the laws of supply and demand. See Nead 97-99, and Fraser Harrison 227.

which include citations of letters by Henry Mayhew to the *Morning Chronicle*), and Bracebridge Hemyng's "Prostitution in London", 1861.⁹ However, before turning to the use of the metaphor of disease and its relationship to prostitution in these texts, I shall look more directly at the way in which they were constructed. Thus I am concerned not only with the "truth" of woman's sexuality which emerges in the texts, but also with how that "truth" is produced.

Textual Strategies: the Confession and the Production of Truth

All the texts under discussion were written by men about women, that is women were objects of this male discourse. But more than this, three of the four authors dealt directly with the women about whom they were writing. Only Greg, the essayist, was solely reliant on secondary sources: Parent-Duchatelet's *De la Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris* (1836), Ryan's *Prostitution in London* (1839), and Mayhew's letters to the *Morning Chronicle*. Mayhew and Hemyng, as investigative journalists, and Acton, as a physician, all worked among prostitutes, interviewed, investigated, then collated and interpreted the material they gathered.¹⁰

According to Foucault, we should call into question the repressive hypothesis of nineteenth-century sexuality, especially the controls on sex through words. This silencing of sex, the attempt to "extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present", the "interplay of prohibitions that referred back

⁹ Greg, "Prostitution" 448-506; William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, with a new bibliographical note by Professor Anne Humphreys (2nd ed. 1870; London: Frank Cass, 1972) xii; Hemyng, "Prostitution in London" 210-272. Page references to each of these works will be given hereafter in parentheses in the body of the text after the name of the author.

¹⁰ I would agree with Mary Poovey's assertion that all the writers were "explicitly or implicitly indebted" to Duchatelet. Mary Poovey, "Speaking of the Body: Mid-Victorian Constructions of Female Desire", Jacobus, Keller, and Shuttleworth 31.

to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence" (17) is replaced by the proposition of "a veritable discursive explosion". Foucault does not deny that "there was a policing of statements", that the circumstances, the audience, and the social milieu were more strictly defined. However, if there was, as Foucault claims, a "restrictive economy" of enunciation, which affected the "politics of language and speech - spontaneous on the one hand, concerted on the other" (18), then I believe that the definition of that economy must be extended to include areas of "tact and discretion" which Foucault ignores. The areas he lists tend to be, if not gender free, at least gender unstated: parents and children, teachers and pupils, masters and domestic servants. We note that it is not "mistress and servants", and we can wonder if girl children were treated more tactfully than boys. There is no discussion in his work of the established area of "tact and discretion" between men and women, or between women and women. The rise of capitalism accompanied not only the expansion of bourgeois society, but also a redefinition, a transformation of gender roles which, perpetuated and reinforced by medical and scientific, as well as the more traditional religious discourses, is of necessity part of this economy, and implicated in the growing power of the middle classes. Foucault does not deny this, in fact goes on to note the "steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" (18), but in no instance does he relate this to gender difference. How are we to take the implications of a passage such as this?¹¹

¹¹ For a recent summary of the feminist critiques of Foucault's work in terms of "gender blindness" see Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) 32-38. In *The History of Sexuality*, Vols.2 and 3 Foucault concentrates on texts produced by, for and about a social elite, that of the free male citizen. McNay sees some active strategies possible for women in Foucault's idea of the "care of the self". From a different perspective of these later volumes, Stephen Heath contrasts Foucault's use of the word "subject", with its two meanings - "subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his [sic] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" - and that of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Heath, Foucault provides the long history of the desiring subject (in which is included a history of psychoanalysis), whereas psychoanalysis looks at the "subject as constitutively divided, realized in its in-process-as-subject construction; language, unconscious, sexual all bound up in a history that is the fact of the subject". Foucault, therefore, takes sexual difference as given, rather than looking at the constitution of that difference. Stephen Heath, "The Ethics of Sexual Difference", *Discourse* 12.2 (1990,): 135-136.

This is the essential thing: that Western *man* has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning *his sex*; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself. Not only were the boundaries of what one could say about sex enlarged, and *men* compelled to hear it said; but more important, discourse was connected to sex by a complex organization with varying effects, by a deployment that cannot be adequately explained merely by referring it to a law of prohibition. A censorship of sex? There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever greater discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy. (23, emphases added)¹²

The implications of this for women are implications merely, and never directly voiced. In the proliferation of discourses on sex, those constructing women's sexuality, as I have already said, were, for the most part, by and for men about women.¹³ Gender is an issue of power relations that Foucault does not address explicitly, except in terms of the hysterization of women. However, in writing of the sexuality of children, he claims that "this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence" and we could use his explanation to apply to women as well. Silence can be described as not so much the absence of discourse as a new regime of discourses; as Foucault writes, "things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results"; silence is in fact "an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (27). Thus in order to interpret silences we must look at the "different

¹² In the original French my italicized phrases read similarly: "*l'homme occidental*", "*de tout dire sur son sexe*" (a more ambiguous adjectival pronoun, but also referring to "*l'homme*"), and "*et astreint les hommes à l'étendre toujours*". Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Sexualité: La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 33.

¹³ I am not claiming that women did not participate in the discourses concerning women's sexuality, for it is with women's discourse that I am concerned for much of this thesis. However, the fields granted the most authority and the weight of "truth" were controlled by men.

ways of not saying such things", decide which types of discourse are authorised and determine who is allowed and who not allowed to speak and the relation between them. According to Foucault "there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (27). Therefore in the discourses on the sexuality of women we must look for the female speaking subject and ask ourselves why she is silenced, or if she speaks, through case studies, journalistic reports, or the wider field of literary production, what processes of selection have taken place, what lacunae are present, what questions were asked to produce such answers, what figurative devices were employed (metaphors of disease, for example); what has, in sum, been left out, or appended, and for what purpose?

For Foucault, the confession had been the mainstay of the "production of the true discourse on sex" (63), but the form of the confession, over the nineteenth century, spread to other configurations and relationships than that of priest and penitent, and, in the process, it was secularized. The confession now took the form of interviews, investigations, medical consultations, autobiographical accounts, or letters, which were recorded, transcribed, collated, published, provoking commentary and debate, producing the truth of sexuality. It developed from being a spoken, and thus irretrievable, medium into a solidified body of writing, taking on the authority of the written word and no longer concerned overtly with sin and salvation. As with the medical texts discussed in the previous chapter, the texts concerning prostitution form part of this "discourse of science". Statistical evidence, the citation of other authorities, but above all the use of first hand observation, "lived experience as evidence", mark the texts by Acton, Mayhew and Hemyng as claiming scientific authenticity.¹⁴

¹⁴ The works on prostitution, being concerned with a moral issue, might seem less removed from the confession in that the purpose was to expose and perhaps eliminate what was regarded as a sin, and to work to the salvation of the fallen woman. Certainly there was, in some of the narratives by women reported by Mayhew and Hemyng, the element of the confession of shame and guilt and

In these texts, the women talked and the men recorded, observed and interpreted. Foucault sees the power in this relationship as emanating from below, not power from above, like that of master and pupil, but a bond of intimacy between speaker and listener, as well as between "the one who speaks and what he is speaking about" (62). The position of power is therefore not only reversed, but also working over a field, that is, on a horizontal rather than a vertical axis. "The agency of domination", according to Foucault, "does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know. And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one *from whom it is wrested*" (62, emphasis added). It is necessary to note the violence of this image, the passivity of the speaker emphasized by the passive form of the verb, when we apply such a situation to the texts under discussion. Although Foucault was talking of the psychoanalytic session, there is a similar power structure operating in these texts, with the social investigator and the subject under investigation. The truth of sexuality resided not in the women who spoke, but in the mediating discourse of the men who questioned, reported and interpreted, selected, shaped and published their words. This sexuality was constructed around the ideas of disease and illness. The prostitute was defined in terms of her innate womanly characteristics in order to accommodate her into a society which needed therefore to control her sexuality, but this definition by similarity with her middle-class sister problematized the sexuality, the domestic ideal, of the middle-class woman. I will look now at textual strategies used in the production of

the desire for penitence and forgiveness. However, this was less clearly so in Greg and Acton. Although Greg favoured a Christian act of forgiveness towards the prostitute, both he and Acton promoted the need for legislation to control prostitution and the spread of disease, promoting the purification and salvation of the health of the middle classes - science intersected with morality.

sexuality in these texts, and, to begin with, at those instances where the words of women are reported, where the “discourse of truth” is being wrested, and discuss the idea of power in this relationship.

Acton’s text was written from personal observation. The women are presented as examples rather than individuals, categorized from his experiencing of their lives as an outside investigator, using his trained medical eye. His account includes first hand observations, as well as eyewitness accounts of colleagues and friends. Therefore, in Acton’s case, the authenticity of the text lies in the fact that he had seen, or knew the person who had seen, the details which were reported. He writes, for example:

With the sanction of Sir Richard Mayne, and with an introduction to Dr. Barr, I made a visit to the camp and town of Aldershott [*sic*] *to witness for myself* the condition of prostitution at this great military centre, and *to inquire on the spot* into the state of things existing at the present day under the operation of the Contagious Diseases Act. ... We were assisted in our investigations by Police Inspector Smith, whom I found a most useful cicerone in making my rounds in corners and places, that it would have been impossible to see or venture into without his support. (Acton, 24, emphases added)

Here it is his own “lived experience as evidence”, backed up as he was with the official sanction of representatives of government, medicine and law, which grants authority to his words and gives them the privilege of truth.

Acton’s gaze was consistently middle-class, both in his desire to see the prostitute reconstituted as wife and mother, and in the normative framework he provides for this reconstitution. Women in the lock hospital at Aldershot, for example, were not viewed as prisoners, despite the language of surveillance and

constraint in which he describes them.¹⁵ He sees them as “comely looking girls, appearing to great advantage in the hospital uniform”. Their demeanour was “most respectful; there was no noise, no bad language, no sullenness, no levity” (Acton, 91). The string of negatives dehumanises them, silences their vivacity, despite his comment on the hospital system and the teaching of basic housewifery that “thus are these miserable women being humanised” (Acton, 92). Yet the women, muted in the presence of male authority, do find occasional voices in the text, although indirectly. Earlier in the same passage Acton describes how it was regrettable that the windows have to be kept closed with blinds and whitened glass, keeping out light and air, because, since the hospital was next to “a much frequented road”, there had been great difficulty “in keeping the inmates from presenting themselves at the window, and holding conversations with the soldiers and others outside the building” (Acton, 91). The implications here are that the women were not necessarily as subdued as they might appear, that it took strict vigilance to quell them and their own perception of their sexuality. The comment, condemnatory in tone, provides a window on to other lives outside the text, outside the restrictive gaze which objectified the women, a site from which they might speak, if they were not so effectively silenced.

In another case, the truth is seen as being mediated through the observer:

On this point of gaining access to [prostitutes] we may listen with advantage to the remarks of one whose official duties at various places of amusement have thrown him amongst them, and who has related to me the result of his experience. He says: - “By a little, a very little, kindness of manner towards them from myself, an official in a responsible position, and a willingness to render them any trifling assistance, and frequently advice, a sort of confidence

¹⁵ The word “lock” despite its apparent association with imprisonment, derived from “loke”, a house for lepers. Both meanings carry the connotations of surveillance, social stigma, and isolation. See Walkowitz 39, and Mahood 29.

was established, and they would unreservedly pour their troubles and their doings into my ear. I am convinced that by such means only one can obtain reliable information; and they are extremely jealous of any person questioning them out of mere curiosity, and it is only by tact, after confidence is established, that the whole truth and mysteries of their lives can be learned." (Acton, 241)

We have here the words of a man of responsibility, whom we have the "advantage" of hearing because he relays the truth, whose restraint is contrasted with the "unreserved" outpourings of the women. The truth is not so much wrested from them, as elicited by acts of tact and kindness, as the bond of intimacy which Foucault talks about is cemented. The women are seen by the speaker as somehow holding the key to truth about their sexuality. The assumption is that truth is immanent in the words of the women, that there is hidden, secret knowledge to be discovered, when in fact it is the listener, "the one who questions and is not supposed to know" as Foucault writes, who, by questioning with a purpose, rather than out of "mere curiosity", holds the power to produce a discourse of truth. It is he who represented the words of the women as "the whole truth and mysteries of their lives", a source of knowledge to be "learned".

It is in the works of Mayhew and Hemyng that we hear these voices and these words, and yet they in turn provide problems of interpretation. Both writers made extensive use of verbatim reporting, as well as paraphrasing, of the words of the women that they talked with. Here, we might say, we have the authentic voices of the women. The problem arises when we contextualize these reports, and see how they were arranged, edited, and commented on, that is, how the discourse of truth was produced.

In Foucault's description of confession, power relations are not discussed in terms of gender or of class. But in the situation where the listener was male and

middle-class, a figure of authority, and the speaker female and working-class, the question of power is more problematical. An important consideration about the confessions made to Mayhew and Hemyng is the possibility that the women could give to the reporter those facts which they believed the reporter wished to hear. When Hemyng asked Lushing Loo her background, she replied, "rather impatiently", "Oh, I'm a seduced milliner ... anything you like" (Hemyng, 224). In Hemyng's "Prostitution in London" especially, there is an underlying tension between the way in which, on the one hand, he calls attention to the fact that the word of these women could not be trusted, but on the other, he believes these stories at times and reports them as the truth. He writes, "the fallacies about clergymen's daughters and girls from the middle classes forming the majority of such women are long ago exploded; there may be some amongst them but they are few and far between" (Hemyng, 216), and points out that

loose women generally throw a veil over their early life, and you seldom, if ever, meet with a woman who is not either a seduced governess or a clergyman's daughter; not that there is a word of truth in such an allegation - but it is their peculiar whim to say so. (Hemyng, 217)

Yet for all that Hemyng claims that the word of a prostitute was not to be believed, especially concerning her antecedents, nevertheless he reported faithfully those very words. In the case of the lowest of the low, the park walkers, he tells one particularly moving story of seduction and disgrace, and comments on it that "this recital is melancholy in the extreme. Here was a woman endowed with a very fair amount of education, speaking in a superior manner, making use of words that very few in her position would know how to employ, reduced by a variety of circumstances to the very bottom of a prostitute's career" (Hemyng, 244). His report raises two issues. Firstly there is the question of why, if he wished to dispel the myth of the seduced governess or clergyman's daughter, did Hemyng then use such stories as evidence? This particular case

endorses the bathos of the fallen woman, the good (we are to understand middle-class and well-bred) woman who ended up on bad times, a cautionary tale which would have more impact on middle-class readers who would more readily identify with one of their own class than with the likes of "Lushing Lucy" and "Swindling Sal", who entertain us in other parts of Hemyng's narrative.¹⁶

The second point to be made about this particular case is its fictionality. By this I do not mean that the veracity of the story is to be questioned, but that elements of the woman's autobiographical account read like the plot of a novel.¹⁷ The possibility was apparent to the woman herself, for she introduced her story with "if I were to tell you my history it would be so romantic you would not believe it" (Hemyng, 242). The pretty daughter of a poor curate, she went out as a governess, and formed an attachment with the son of the family. He promised to marry her, arranged for a mock ceremony to be performed and they lived together as man and wife, eventually ending up on the Continent, where her lover lost by gambling all the money he inherited, and then committed suicide. She did not return home, but took up with a friend of her former lover, an officer who eventually abandoned her in London, after which she began a life of prostitution for survival. By the time of her interview with Hemyng she was ravaged with syphilis, which had disfigured her face. Even this however is given a romantic gloss by Hemyng: "She always wore a long thick veil, that concealed her features, and made her interesting to the unsuspecting and

¹⁶ However, even with Lushing Loo, the text stresses the qualities which make her similar to, rather than different from, the middle-class lady: "I had only glanced at her before, and a careful scrutiny surprised me, while it impressed me in her favour. She was lady-like in appearance, although haggard. ... Her clothes were neat, and evidenced taste in their selection, although they were cheap. ... Her taste was sufficiently aristocratic to prefer pale brandy to the usual beverage dispensed in gin-palaces" (Hemyng, 224).

¹⁷ The woman's story has parallels with novels like *East Lynne*, although in this case it was the governess who eloped to the continent to live with her lover, only to be abandoned. The probable fate of the seduced and abandoned woman which forms the subtext of such novels is here graphically illustrated.

unwise" (Hemyng, 245). He believed that the woman would not have long to live, but nevertheless, she provides an alternative ending to her story, one that fits more closely to the fictional elements of it: "She added, she once thought of turning Roman Catholic, and getting admitted into a convent, where she might make atonement for her way of living by devoting the remainder of her life to penitence, but she was afraid she had gone too far to be forgiven" (Hemyng, 245).¹⁸

Again, during the passages from Mayhew's letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, quoted in Greg's article, we encounter the narrative quality of this kind of reporting, where the writers draw upon the tropes and conventions of literary discourse. There is the verbatim transcription of statements by women, yet with editorial annotation, both in the use of italics, where it is unclear whether those were in the original text, or in Greg's appropriation of it, and in asides, in parentheses, which add the narrative detail: "[Here the woman burst out crying, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her old rusty shawl]" (Greg, 463). Sometimes the fictionality emerges from the selfconscious comments of Mayhew himself: "The story which follows was perhaps one of the most tragic and touching romances ever read. I must confess, that to myself the mental and bodily agony of the poor Magdalene who related it, was quite overpowering" (Greg, 465). The girl is romanticized by the use of words such as "Magdalene", which soften and elevate her occupation, and imply the redemptive nature of the middle-class interlocutor, as well as by the attention paid to her intensity of feeling. "As she held her hands before her eyes, I could see the tears oozing between her fingers. Indeed, I never remember to have witnessed such intense

¹⁸ In Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely but too Well* (1867) the heroine, Kate, spends the rest of her days in a sisterhood in London after the death of her great love, Dare Stamer. Margaret Hale, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, ashamed that her appearance in public has been interpreted in sexual terms (the coded language of prostitution), considers herself "in the mood in which women of another religion take the veil". Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1854; London: Dent, 1968) 389. See Chapter 7.

grief" (Greg, 465). In fact, the fictionality of her story led Mayhew to disbelieve it until it had been authenticated by outside male, and presumably middle-class, witnesses. At the same time he imparts authority and credence to his own actions, which in themselves seem excessive, in the quantity of details given to describe such actions:

Her statement was of so startling a nature, that I felt it due to the public to inquire into the character of the girl. Though it was late at night, and the gentleman who had brought the case to me assured me that he himself was able to corroborate almost every word of the girl's story, still I felt that I should not be doing my duty to the office that had been entrusted to me, if I allowed so pathetic and romantic a statement to go forth without using every means to test the truth of what I had heard. Accordingly, being informed that the girl was in service, I made the best of my way, not only to her present master, but also to the one she had left but a few months previous. The gentleman who had brought her to me, willingly accompanied me thither. One of the parties lived at the east end of London, the other in the extreme suburbs of London. The result was well worth the journey. Both persons spoke in the highest terms of the girl's honesty, sobriety, and industry, and of her virtue in particular. (Greg, 465)

The use of words like "tragic" and "romance" calls our attention to the way the women's stories are retold within the conventions of literary narrative. The link between such narratives and Foucault's idea of confession lies in the power of the investigator, who is not only the listener to the women's confessions, but the mediator between the women and the reading public. Both the women and the writer are telling stories. As an investigator, the writer has the power of "reading" the women, of interpreting signs important for the production of truth. His is an hermeneutic process, and he functions as a critic, deciphering the true nature of women's sexuality. Foucault sees this process of decipherment as operating "within the regular formation of a scientific discourse" (67). Knowledge is institutionalized within the new science of sociological investigation. However, as a writer, the investigator draws upon another

discourse involved in the production of knowledge, the discourse of literature. In interpreting signs for the reader, he has the power to shape and arrange the women's stories, to fit them into already acknowledged patterns, and to search out the paradigms and tropes of literary conventions. The stories in themselves are not tragedies or romances, but are produced as such through the mediation of the male writer. Thus the women are no longer historical individuals, but exempla. They are turned into characters, and their stories into plots.

The fictional arrangement of accounts by Mayhew and Hemyng is emphasized not only by the use of analogies with, but by examples from fiction. Greg, in particular, used fiction as a basis of proof. To provide evidence of the inevitability of the harlot's progress he quotes from Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* the interchange between Jem and Esther, Mary's aunt who had been seduced and abandoned, had turned to prostitution to survive, and was now wretched, forsaken, and desperate. Greg uses her words "though in a work of fiction" to show "a faithful picture of the feelings of thousands of these poor wretches" (Greg, 454)¹⁹. Thus, within his text, Greg makes use of novels, poetry, Mayhew's published letters, Michael Ryan's *Prostitution in London*, and Parent-Duchatelet's *De la Prostitution dans la Ville de Paris*, cited in its original French, all as equal sources of authority.

Greg's work was, of course, that of a writer who relied on secondary sources to provide his material. Hemyng and Mayhew stressed instead the fact that the stories they reported were in the words of the original speaker. Mayhew quoted verbatim, usually with some introductory statement, ranging from the neutral "Her story is as follows" (Greg, 462), to the more directive "The first of these made the following extraordinary statement" (Greg, 463) and "With this

¹⁹ See Part 2, especially chapters 6 and 7, for further discussion of the intertextual connections between Greg's and Gaskell's works.

preamble let me proceed to tell her story in her own touching words" (Greg, 465). Hemyng, on the other hand, is more anecdotal, and we are more aware of his intrusive presence in the material he reports, which in turn leads to an awareness of how the evidence was gathered in the first place, how the words of the women are not just reported but selected, then arranged in a context of commentary and juxtaposition with male discourse which shaped, transformed, and redefined them. In one instance he writes that

a revolting and horrible case exemplifying the truth of this statement came under our notice some short time back. We were examining a girl, who gave the following replies to the questions put to her. "My name is Ellen, I have no other. Yes, I sometimes call myself by various names, but rarely keep to one longer than a month or two ..." (Hemyng, 213).

Here the girl's story is already prejudged for the reader as "revolting and horrible". The story is used to prove the truth of what has already been hypothesized, directed by the questions the men ask her, questions which are then obliterated from the text of her story although their original presence is made obvious by the inclusion of such words as "yes" to indicate a reply.

In other cases the questions are retained in the text, but in a more narrative situation, where Hemyng writes with the air of a raconteur, sure of a good story:

"Did he pay her well?"

This was merely a question to ascertain the amount of remuneration that she, and others like her, were in the habit of receiving; but it had the effect of enraging her to a great extent. My informant was a tall, stout woman, about seven-and-twenty, with a round face, fat cheeks, a rather wheezy voice, and not altogether destitute of good looks. Her arms were thick and muscular, while she stood well on her legs, and altogether appeared as if she would be a formidable opponent in a street-quarrel or an Irish row.

"Did he pay well? Was I a-going to insult her? What was I asking her sich a 'eap of questions for? Why, Joe was good for a --- sight more than she thought I was! - "polite." Then she was sorry for it,

never meant to be. Joe worn't a five-bobber, much less a bilker, as she'd taken her dying oath I was." "Would she take a drop of summut?" "Well, she didn't mind if she did."

An adjournment to a public house in the immediate vicinity, where "Swindling Sal" appeared much at home, mollified and appeased her. (Hemyng, 223)

In this passage we have an attempt to capture the "real" voice of the woman whom Hemyng interviewed, a strong woman, not easily quelled, who stood up for herself and in turn questioned his right to ask her such personal questions. But in the transcription of the interview, she is objectified, distanced, by several devices. Firstly there is the narrative device of description, of carrying on the plot, through detailing the events, and of describing her as a character in his story. Then, although he tries to repeat the nature of her speech, "summat", "sich a 'eap", her words are not recorded directly but turned around into a curious mixture of indirect speech written as direct speech. This has the effect of making Hemyng himself the subject of the story and her speech, while she becomes the object: "What was I asking her sich a 'eap of questions for?" She has become a "character" in the sense of an interesting oddity. She stands out as being atypical, a figure of fun, an entertainment for the middle-class readers with her Sam Wellerish diction and unfeminine ways.

A story told by Mayhew which similarly represents woman as spectacle provides a literal example of the way in which the words of women were mediated through male discourse. Publication presented a medium through which restricted private female discourse, suitably monitored by male perception, could be exposed to the public gaze. Mayhew arranged for a meeting of prostitutes to take place so that he could gather first hand material on how poverty had forced them on to the streets. What is stressed in this passage is the privacy of the gathering: "from the shame of their mode of life becoming known, it would be almost impossible to collect together a *number* of females who

would be ready to say much *publicly*" (Greg, 467, emphasis in original); "everything should be done to assure the parties of the strict privacy of the assembly"; "cards of admission were issued and distributed as privately as possible". The resulting attendance of twenty-five women, as well as the "tales" they told, astonished him:

Never in all history was such a sight seen, or such tales heard. There, in the dim haze of the large bare room in which they met, sat women and girls, some with babies suckling at their breasts - others in rags - and even these borrowed, in order that they might come and *tell their misery to the world*. I have witnessed many a scene of sorrow lately; I have heard stories that have unmanned me; but never until last Wednesday had I seen or heard anything so solemn, so terrible as this. If ever eloquence was listened to, it was in the outpourings of those poor lorn mothers' hearts for their base-born little ones, as each told her woes and struggles, and *published her shame* amid the convulsive sobs of the others - nay, all present. (Greg, 467, emphases added)

The emphasis placed on privacy and maternity effectively domesticates these women, and downplays their intrusion into the public marketplace, both in terms of their work and the publication of their words. At the same time the rhetoric of the passage aims at poeticizing the women, "those poor lorn mothers". Both strategies are intended to engage the reader's sympathies. The women are presented as a spectacle, mediated by male discourse, visible and invisible. The claim of privacy was, in fact, misleading. For Mayhew's "all present" meant not only the women and "the gentleman and myself" whom they had agreed might be "the only male persons visible on the occasion" but also "behind a screen, removed from sight, so as not to wound the modesty of the women - who were nevertheless aware of their presence - sat two reporters from this journal, to take down *verbatim* the confessions and declarations of those assembled" (Greg, 467, emphasis in original).

If these were the methods of production, what, therefore, was the construction of female sexuality that was produced in the debate on prostitution?

The Prostitute and the Middle-class Lady: All Sisters Together?

In *Myths of Sexuality*, Lynda Nead discusses comprehensively representations of the prostitute in Victorian England, which she sees as taking two distinct patterns. First there was the dominant image of the prostitute “as a figure of contagion, disease and death; a sign of social disorder and ruin to be feared and controlled”. But there was also a second representation which “displaced these connotations of power and destruction and defined the prostitute as a suffering and tragic figure - the passive victim of a cruel and relentless society”.²⁰ Where the former was depicted as a threat to respectable society, the latter was often described as following “the harlot’s progress”, the downward path to degradation and early death. However, where Lynda Nead interprets the prostitute’s role in terms of deviancy from the norm of sexuality, I would argue that in the works of Greg, Acton, Mayhew and Hemyng, a tension exists between the definitions of prostitute as *different from* and as *similar to* the middle-class lady, and that this raises problems about the sexuality of both. Lynda Nead claims that these two central images were not set up in opposition to one another, but that “both worked to define the prostitute as deviant and abnormal and sought to separate the prostitute from respectable society through claims concerning her appearance, her habits, her lifestyle, and her moral and sexual behaviour”.²¹ I believe that in the works I investigate quite the opposite is taking place.²²

²⁰ Nead 106.

²¹ Nead 106.

²² Mary Poovey, in “Speaking of the Body” 33, arrives at a similar conclusion, in her discussion of Greg’s “Prostitution”. Poovey’s essay came to my attention after I had already prepared the first draft of this chapter, and presented my reading of Acton’s work in a paper at the University of

Acton, Greg, Mayhew and Hemyng were engaged in similar discourses, in the formation of that discursive object, the prostitute. However, at the same time, they defined and redefined aspects of woman's sexuality: her natural passivity, her natural desire to please, and thus to sacrifice her honour and all that (according to the writers) was precious. But before I look at the way the use of the metaphor of disease problematizes such a construction of women's sexuality, it is necessary to investigate further how the prostitute is defined in these texts in relation to her middle-class "sister". The divisions in such discourse, the oppositions, are not only between male and female natures but between the natural and unnatural woman; in fact the distinction is made between those women who flaunted their sexuality and those who did not, between public and private display. But at the same time, prostitution is domesticated. By comparing prostitutes with "ordinary", "normal" women, and emphasizing their similarities, the texts dissolve the boundaries, and, instead of an opposition, establish a continuum. The question subsequently arises, where does that which signifies the prostitute end, and that which signifies the normal woman begin? If prostitutes were really like all women, then were not all women really like prostitutes? All women, at the least, were potential prostitutes (awaiting only the seducer).²³

In his definition of the prostitute, Acton wished to make her natural and unnatural at one and the same time. For him, all humans are tripartite beings,

Canterbury (NZ) English Departmental Conference, August 1990, and again at the Australasian Victorian Studies Association Conference, in Brisbane, Australia, February, 1991. See Jeni Curtis, "Silence, Self-Sacrifice, and Sexuality: Illness and Metaphor in Acton's *Prostitution* and Gaskell's *North and South*", *Australasian Victorian Studies Association: Brisbane Conference Papers, 1991*, ed. Barbara Garlick (Brisbane: U of Queensland, 1991) 137-143.

²³ In an article in the *Lancet* the domestic image was made explicitly: "for after all the prostitute is sister to those by our firesides". "Prostitution: Its Medical Aspects", *Lancet* 2 (1858): 198, cited in Walkowitz 61.

possessing body, mind and spirit. Since "woman was created to be the companion of man, and her nature presents the exact counterpart of his" (Acton, 162), the only true relationship between men and women is that which engages all three aspects of their humanity, as exemplified in "the married state", "the result and crowning experience of mutual passion" (Acton, 163). For Acton any other relationship is a substitute for this, and as such, is unnatural, because it is self-indulgent, the mere gratification of appetites, and without reciprocal duties and obligations. It is apparent that such relationships outside of social order are dangerous and must be contained. But the necessary control is not so easy to accomplish because the woman's position in the relationship is ambivalent. She is not easily contained since she is both natural and unnatural, in excess of the given order.

Acton's discussion of prostitution oscillates uneasily between two related discourses, that of supply and demand, and that of desire and need. Neither of these discourses is neutral, but both are imbued with gender implications. The first is from the public and masculine world of commerce; the second from the private and personal sphere of the body, associated with women, but also with the moral and religious discourse of sin. The prostitute is situated, excessively, in both these worlds. The demand for prostitution, Acton argues, arises "from ill-regulated and uncontrolled desire", which is "the natural instinct of man". Its supply, however, derives from "the vice of women". Various social restraints such as the difficulty of early marriages, or occupations which prevent marriage, as in the case of soldiers, hamper the licit gratification of men's desires. Women also suffer from social constraints like "extreme poverty" or "the inability to obtain a living by honest means". Nevertheless, other social problems such as "early neglect" or "evil training, bad associates, and an indecent mode of life" only serve to reinforce women's "vicious inclinations", their "love of drink, love of dress, love of amusement" (Acton, 165). There is, therefore, a strong

distinction made between men's desires and women's, between the more positive "natural instincts" of men and the negative "natural sinfulness" of women. Acton reasserts the traditional anti-feminist arguments of religion: men, although sinful, would not be driven to sin, if women were not more sinful; "want and demand are insufficient of themselves to create supply; they are strongly provoking causes, but not creative" (Acton, 165).

For W. R. Greg, the emphasis lies less in woman's sinfulness, than in her desire to please men which he saw as one of the causes of prostitution. Acton drew heavily on this passage in his work, and both construct a sexuality for women in which sexual desire is absent or, rather, redefined, and the desire for self-abnegation is paramount, both as wife and mother.²⁴ The most evident example of the ideological framework Acton works within occurs in his elaboration of the causes of prostitution, which he summarised as "misplaced love", "inordinate vanity", and "sheer destitution" (Acton, 181). Of these three, more time is spent on the first than the other two, and this stems from Acton's belief that "female frailty" was innate in women. Woman's own sexual desire is not considered, or is considered only to be quickly dismissed. Her desire is instead to be the object of pleasure, to be seen only in relation to men. As Acton writes:

It appears to be pretty generally admitted that uncontrollable sexual desires of her own play but a little part in inducing profligacy of the female. Strong passions, save in exceptional cases, at certain times, and in advanced stages of dissipation, as little disturb the economy of the human as they do that of the brute female. (Acton, 178)

It would appear, therefore, that to be a desiring woman is to be unnatural, "exceptional" and dissipated. Here Acton calls in as an authority Greg's

²⁴ Mary Poovey also notes the similarity between the two writers, "Speaking of the Body" 45, n. 10.

anonymous article in the *Westminster Review*, which alluded “delicately” to the fact that “a vast proportion” of prostitutes “fall in the first instance from a mere exaggeration and perversion of one of the best qualities of a woman’s heart”. The fallen woman is the potential fate of all women since they all share “a positive love of self-sacrifice” and “a strange and sublime unselfishness” which allow them to “yield to desires in which they do not share, from a weak generosity which cannot refuse anything to the passionate entreaties of the man they love”. The language of the feminine ideal permeates the passage: “weak”, unselfish, self-sacrifice, and an “unreasoning” yearning (not desire). Acton is wary of endorsing the idea of wholesale seduction “in the proper meaning of the word” (Acton, 179), yet he includes this lengthy reference which serves to subvert his conclusion. Lynda Nead interprets passages like this as stressing the passivity of the women, and depicting the prostitute as victim:

In line with the dominant models of male sexual aggression and female passivity, the act of seduction was commonly offered as the reason for a young woman’s fall from virtue.²⁵

Although elsewhere she discusses the attractions of the pursuit of the feminine ideal and the idea of self-sacrifice, at this point she does not look at the element of self-sacrifice as an active desire on the woman’s part, its construction a sign of innate femininity.²⁶ Even if a woman was denied sexual desire, another desire replaced this to account for her fall.

Hemyng similarly elevates the woman’s active role through her essential desire to please:

The love of woman is usually pure and elevated. But when she devotes her affections to a man who realizes her ideal, she does not

²⁵ Nead 139.

²⁶ Nead 24.

hesitate to sacrifice all she holds dear, for his gratification, ignoring her own interest and her own inclination. Actuated by a noble *abnegation of self*, she derives a melancholy pleasure from the knowledge that she has utterly given up all she had formerly so zealously guarded, and she feels that her love has reached its grand climacteric, when, without the slightest pruriency of imagination to urge her on to the consummation, without the remotest vestige of libidinous desire to prompt her to *selfimmolation*, without a shadow of meretricious feeling lurking within her, she abandons her person beyond redemption to the idol she has set up in the highest place in her soul. (Hemyng, 212, emphases added)

Although Hemyng states that this "heroic martyrdom" is only one, and then not a primary, cause of prostitution, the amount of space he spends describing it indicates that for him it really was the most important, despite what he openly claims to be so - low wages. The passage is also similar to those in the other texts in the language of religion that it uses. A woman's love set up the man as a god, an idol to be worshipped.²⁷ However, the most noticeable aspect of this passage is the way it both granted and denied the woman sexual desire. A vocabulary of sexuality, "climacteric", "consummation", "libidinous desire", vies uneasily with, and subverts, the negating repetition of "without". Somehow the woman reaches this abandonment of self through the abandoning of sexual feeling, which is deemed prurient and meretricious. Women's sexuality has to be recast in terms of ideals, "pure", "noble", and sacrificing.

For Greg, the danger for women lies in their ignorance, for "many - far more than would generally be believed - fall from pure unknowingness" (Greg, 459).

²⁷ Acton and Greg both made use of this analogy. In writing of self-sacrifice Greg uses terms which were extreme, those of religious excess, "It is an unreasoning and dangerous yearning of the spirit, precisely analogous to that which prompts the surrenders and self-tortures of the religious devotee. Both seek their devotion to the idol they have enshrined, by casting down before his altar their richest and most cherished treasures". This extremity of language is not unnoticed in the text: "This is no romantic or over-coloured picture; those who do not deem it so have not known the better portion of the sex, or do not deserve to have known them" (Greg, 459). The danger of love as idolatry is a trope also found in the novel, for example in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (See chapter 11). Elizabeth Gaskell considered the title *Philip's Idol* for her novel *Sylvia's Lovers*.

He, too, ascribes their "fall" to environmental causes. Education, and parenting are important not only in keeping women from knowing about their own dormant desire, but also in learning about the dangers of male sexuality:

Their affections are engaged, their confidence secured; thinking no evil of themselves, they permit caresses which in themselves, and to them, indicate no wrong, are led on ignorantly and thoughtlessly from one familiarity to another, not conscious where those familiarities must inevitably end, till ultimate resistance becomes almost impossible; and they learn - what women can never learn too early or impress too strongly on their minds - that a lover's encroachments, to be repelled successfully, must be repelled and negated at the very outset. (Greg, 459)

Through ignorance, therefore, women rely on what is seen as another natural, innate characteristic, the wish to please. Greg believes that the "vast proportion of those who, after passing through the career of kept mistresses, ultimately come upon the town, fall in the first instance from a mere exaggeration and perversion of one of the best qualities of a woman's heart. They yield to a desire they cannot share, from a weak generosity which cannot refuse anything to the passionate entreaties of the man they love" (Greg, 459). Indeed, it appears paradoxical that women might well have been saved if they had been more unwomanly: "nine out of ten originally modest women who fall from virtue, fall from motives or feelings in which sensuality and self have no share; nay, under circumstances in which selfishness, had they not been of too generous a nature to listen to its dictates, would have saved them" (Greg, 460).

Greg chastizes those who think that women take to prostitution because of lust, because out of "lust, immodest and unruly desires, silly vanity, or deliberate exchange of innocence for luxury and show", lust in women occurs "*never*, or so rarely, that in treating of the subject we may be entitled to ignore the exceptions" (Greg, 456, emphasis in original). The emphatic tone continues as he expounds

his “true view”, setting “this error right”. Greg’s construction of women’s sexuality, made more overtly here, while predating Acton’s publication, is very similar to Acton’s:

Women’s *desires* scarcely ever lead to their fall; for (save in a class of whom we shall speak presently) the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they *have* fallen. In this point there is a radical and essential difference between the sexes. ... In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse. Those feelings which coarse and licentious minds are so ready to attribute to girls, are almost invariably *consequences*. (Greg, 465-7, emphases in original)

Although Greg continues with a definition which seems to stress the differences between middle- and working-class women’s sexuality, because he places importance on environment in creating that difference, the underlying implication, nevertheless, is that women are essentially the same:

Women whose position and education have protected them from exciting causes, constantly pass through life without ever being cognizant of the promptings of the senses. Happy for them that it is so! We do not mean to say that uneasiness may not be felt - that health may not sometimes suffer; but there is no consciousness of the cause. Among all the higher and middle classes, and, to a greater extent that would commonly be believed, among the lower classes also, where they either come of virtuous parents, or have been carefully brought up, this may be affirmed as a general fact. (Greg, 457)

Thus Greg has it both ways. Women do and do not feel sexual desire. Women’s sexual desire is a horrifying potential that environment, through ignorance and education, should silence. Yet this desire, though a possibility, is unnatural; in fact, woman’s very nature is unnatural. Nature, according to Greg, had made a “kind decision”, which needs to be “assisted by that correctness of

feeling" found in English education, to curb strong and spontaneous passion in women, and, therefore, "sexual irregularities". Natural "modesty, decency, and honour" relieve the sufferings and struggles especially of those women for whom marriage is impossible or delayed, in comparison with men who practise such "indulgence" "without restraint or shame". Women's sexuality, therefore, is defined in opposition to men's, not by differences between different classes of women. They are all "the weaker sex", and Greg calls upon his (male) readers to see this as a blessing: "No! Nature has laid many heavy burdens on the delicate shoulders of the weaker sex: Let us rejoice that this at least is spared them" (Greg, 457).

Greg also links the prostitute and the good woman in a radical indictment of marriage. His argument on the economic foundation of marriage is similar to that of some nineteenth-century feminists.²⁸ At first he appears to condemn only those who turned to prostitution for money; not those women driven by want, but those driven by love of luxury: "Some, too, there are for whom no plea can be offered - who voluntarily and deliberately sell themselves to shame, and barter, in a cold spirit of bargain, chastity and reputation for carriages, jewels, and a luxurious table". However, once again, the scope is widened to include a far wider range of women, some of whom would be counted as respectable, following the career of the respectable middle-class women, that is, marriage: "in this respect the unfortunate women who ultimately come upon the town, are far from being the chief or the most numerous delinquents. For one woman who thus, of deliberate choice, sells herself to a lover, ten sell themselves to a

²⁸ The connection between prostitution, marriage and the economic position of women had been made as early as the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. Later in the nineteenth century it featured in the feminist philosophy underlying campaigns for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. In 1870, Mary Hume-Rothery, a prominent member of the Ladies' National Association, wrote in an open letter to Gladstone, that she looked forward to the day "when women shall dare poverty, loneliness, contempt, starvation itself rather than sell themselves, whether to wealthy husbands, or less eligible purchasers", quoted in Walkowitz 128.

husband" (Greg, 458). Greg was aware of the shock to public morality in such an assertion, for he continues, "let not the world cry shame upon us for the juxtaposition. The barter is as naked and as cold in the one case as in the other; the thing bartered is the same; the difference between the two transactions lies in the price that is paid down" (Greg, 459).²⁹

Women are linked as well by their common sexuality. "We have no wish to extenuate the sin or to palliate the weakness", Greg reminds his readers, "but above all, and before all, let us be *just*. What is, among the originally correct-minded and well-conducted, the real difference between the first sacrifice at the shrine of love, in the case of a married and of an unmarried woman? It is not that one feels that she is acting virtuously, and the other that she is acting viciously - *the sense of shame is the same in both cases*: we appeal to all modestly brought up women if it be not so" (Greg, 473, emphasis in original). Sex is a matter of shame to all women, but this could be transformed when sexuality is redefined as a desire for maternity, which emphasises both similarity and difference between the fallen and the good woman:

The married woman feels shame, often even remorse, and a strange confusion of all her previous moral conceptions; but the world laughs at her scruples - tells her that her feelings are all nonsense, and exalts her to the honours of a matron. The unmarried woman experiences the same confusion, remorse, and shame; and the world re-echoes her feelings - confirms the sentence she has passed upon herself, and casts her out upon a dunghill. The practical difference between them being, that the church ceremony - which could not change the nature of the action *common to both, and accompanied and prompted by the same feelings in both* - secures to one a permanent protection, and the sanction of the world and the world's laws; while the other imprudent, deceived, or self-sacrificing creature, is left destitute of either; and the world steps in and says to her, "You shall not return in peace, or virtue, or domestic life - the paradise of comfort and hope is closed to you for

²⁹ This argument is similar to that portrayed by Dickens in *Dombey and Son*, where Edith Dombey and Alice exemplify the women Greg describes.

ever upon earth!" Let us trust that Heaven is more merciful and just. The married woman says to her, "We have both submitted with reluctance and distress to the embraces of the man we loved; but to me the consequences are a happy home and loving children, who are a glory and a crown of honour to my hearthstone; to you, the consequences are desertion, horror, and degradation, and your children shall be a terror and a curse to you. The very same deed - varied only in its antecedents - which leaves *me* free to kneel the next morning at the throne of grace, with an unstained conscience and an assured hope - makes *you* feel that Heaven has cast you off, and that the altar, to which you cling in your agony, is polluted by your touch: and all this because *I* had secured a protector and a legal sanction before I yielded, and you had *not*." (Greg, 473-4, emphases in original)

Thus the difference between the fallen and the good woman lies not in their differing sexualities, but in a cultural constraint, marriage, which imposes a double standard of interpretation upon the same actions and the same innate desires.³⁰ Greg does not criticize marriage in itself; in fact he produces a norm of the "natural" acceptable marriage, founded, as it was for Acton, on love and mutual desire, rather than on economic motives. But even so, that mutual desire is constructed differently for men and women. In the woman's case it is not physical passion, but a sexuality defined as submission, self-abnegation, and a longing for fulfilment through maternity, and Greg includes all women in his construction of femininity.

Similarly, when Greg deals at length with poverty as a cause of women turning to prostitution, though the argument appears to be economic in nature,

³⁰ In another passage Greg condemns the double standard which strict morality imposed on the behaviour of men and women: "Alas! is it not notorious that, of a hundred fathers who would fall upon the neck of the prodigal son, and hail his return with unlimited forgiveness, there is scarcely one who, obedient to the savage morality of the world, would not turn his back upon the erring and repentant daughter?" (Greg, 472). Society for Greg was wrong in condemning the victim of "human infirmity". According to society "*hers* is innate depravity, hopeless degradation, unworthiness which must be pushed out of sight, blotted from memory, ignored in good society and polite speech; *his* are the venial errors of youth, the ordinary tribute to natural desires, the common laxity of a man of the world" (Greg, 474, emphases in original). See Chapter 6, for further discussion of these ideas in relation to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*.

that poor pay led women into prostitution to survive, the subtext of the accounts given in evidence is that these women are truly feminine. Greg stresses their natural virtue, maternal feelings, or ladylike natures. The woman who gave evidence that "I have made pincushions and fancy articles - such as I manage to scrape together - and taken them to the streets to sell, so that I might get an honest living, but I couldn't" (Greg, 466), proclaims her femininity in the triviality of the goods which she could produce for the luxury market. Elsewhere Greg describes "the severity of distress which daily drives many well-disposed and otherwise well-educated women to this disastrous and degrading resource" (Greg, 461); and cites material which claimed that "filial and maternal affection drive many to at least occasional prostitution, as a means, and the only means left to them, of earning bread for those dependent on them for support" (Greg, 460).³¹

Lynda Nead presents the counter argument that one way in which the prostitute could be seen as unnatural was in terms of her deviation from the "natural" feminine ideal of maternal desire. Her sexual deviancy, according to Nead, renders "her unfeminine and physiologically unable to fulfil the most "natural" and elevated role of woman - motherhood".³² There is some support for this argument. Hemyng, for example, describes the childless state of some prostitutes and comments of one: "She had no children. She didn't wish to have any" (Hemyng, 214), implying the unnatural lack of maternal feeling. He was even stronger in his condemnation when he writes of infanticide: "Here we have 226 children killed yearly by their parents: this either shows that our institutions are defective, or that great depravity is inherent amongst

³¹ Mary Poovey, in discussing Greg's strategy of depicting the prostitute as victim, makes the point that "even his recognition that economic hardships drive women to the street invokes a norm of middle-class domesticity in which men support women, and therefore implies that *any* woman who has to work is a victim", "Speaking of the Body" 33 emphasis in original.

³² Nead 100.

Englishwomen" (Hemyng, 222). It is not clear which of the two causes should be believed. Acton, too, writes of "the better inclined class of prostitutes" who

become the wedded wives of men in every grade of society, from the peerage to the stable, and, as they are frequently barren, or have but a few children, there is reason to believe they often live in ease unknown to many women who have never strayed, and on whose unvitiated organization matrimony has entailed the burden of families. (Acton, 40)

Indeed, it would seem from this that motherhood, although natural, and to be desired over the decadence of easy living, was decidedly unhealthy.³³

Nevertheless, there is also sufficient evidence to show that the prostitute is constructed as a "natural" woman, full of the maternal desire shown by all women. Hemyng reports one woman as saying, "It isn't the sin of it, though, that worries me. I don't dare think of that much, but I do think how happy I might have been if I'd always lived at Chatham, and married as other women do, and had a nice home and children; that's what I want, and when I think of all that, I do cut up" (Hemyng, 235). He comments "it is easy to understand the state of mind of this woman, who had a craving after what she knew she never could possess, but which the maternal instinct planted within her forced her to wish for" (Hemyng, 236). Mayhew, as cited in Greg's article, tells the tragic story of the young woman forced into prostitution to get enough money to feed her child. The extremity of her case emphasizes the desperation to which maternal self-sacrifice might force a woman:

"One night in the depth of winter his legs froze to my side. We sat down on the step of a door. I was trying to make my way to the

³³ This is the underlying implication of a point Acton makes elsewhere as well: "If we compare the prostitute at thirty-five with her sister, who perhaps is the married mother of a family, or has been a toiling slave for years in the over-heated laboratories of fashion, we shall seldom find that the constitutional ravages often thought to be necessary consequences of prostitution exceed those attributable to the cares of a family and the heart-wearing struggles of virtuous labour" (Acton, 39).

workhouse, but was so weak I couldn't get on any further. The snow was over my shoes. It had been snowing all day, and me and my boy out in it. We hadn't tasted food since the morning before. ... All this time I was struggling to give up prostitution. I had many offers, but I refused them all. I had sworn to myself that I would keep from that mode of life for my boy's sake." (Greg, 466)

One of the ways, therefore, in which all women are brought together in these texts is in the emphasis placed on what were claimed to be innate, natural qualities of all women, whether working or middle-class, prostitute or lady. It is difficult to pinpoint where Acton, for example, draws the line in his construction of the natural and unnatural woman. When he lists the sources of supply for prostitution, and elaborates on the viciousness of women, although he mentions the problem of "the woman's calling exposing her to temptation", he makes no attempt to distinguish types or classes of women. At this stage we must read these characteristics as those, or potentially those, of all women. Nevertheless, when he attempts to define a prostitute, Acton describes her as unnatural and at this point makes two distinctions. The first is between the unchaste woman and the prostitute. The unchaste woman could lose her character and position, but she is not a prostitute, although she has the potential to become one if she loses her means of living through her unchastity. The second distinction is between the natural self-effacing woman who ministers to the spiritual as well as physical needs of a man, and the prostitute who

gives for money that which she ought to give only for love; who ministers to passion and lust alone, to the exclusion and extinction of all the higher qualities, and nobler sources of enjoyment which combine with desire, to produce the happiness derived from the intercourse of the sexes. (Acton, 166)

This denial of her better, nobler qualities means that she is "a woman with half the woman gone", an unnatural creature. However, in the creation of this distinction between the prostitute, a half woman, and other women who are, by

implication, "whole", the fact that the natural woman must share this half of the prostitute's nature, her sexuality, is overlooked. The prostitute has lost "that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity", but the underlying implication is that all women must have that potential to be instruments of impurity. Thus the natural is an extension from the unnatural, the same plus more, not an opposite. The half woman that is the prostitute is the silenced half of the "natural woman". She is the dark unrecognised unspoken shadow, which can find articulation only when she is removed, divorced, projected outwards and set up as an opposition, an other.

At no point in Acton's work is woman's own desire taken into account. She is an object who is able to "not only gratify desire, but also to arouse it" (Acton, 166). As "a sad burlesque of woman", the prostitute presents herself "as an object of lust instead of an object of honourable love". Once again the natural and unnatural are alike, not different. They are both objects, and it is assumed that their desire is to be the guide of man, leading either to greater heights or lower depths. The prostitute teaches a man to "make, if possible, of every woman the thing he desires - a toy, a plaything, an animated doll; a thing to wear like a glove, and fling away; to use like a horse, and send to the knackers when worn out; the mere object of his fancy and servant of his appetite". And even though woman is acknowledged to be "an immortal being, composed, like himself, of body, soul and spirit - his associate and consort, endowed with memory and hope and strong affections, with a heart to love, to feel, to suffer", she is not allowed to take up this subject position because her true role is to be "man's highest prize and surest safeguard; the inspirer of honest love and manly exertion, powerful

'Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought and amiable words,
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.'" (Acton, 167)

A prize or a toy, she is defined only in relation to men's needs and desires. Thus once again, while it seems as if a difference is established between the prostitute and the "normal" woman, when these women are set in contrast to men, they can be perceived as forming part of a continuum, not an opposition. If a prostitute was a woman with half the woman gone, the Victorian angel in the house was the woman with half the woman silenced.³⁴

A similar conflation of the two types of women is apparent elsewhere in Acton's text, where he wished to play down the differences between prostitutes and other women, in effect to domesticate them. For the sake of his argument, that the Contagious Disease Act should be extended to the population in civilian as well as military centres, he needed to assert that most prostitutes found their way back into society and thus respectability, by way of marriage.³⁵ To reinforce this assertion, he blurs the boundaries between prostitutes and ordinary women, by making distinctions between the public and the private, between the women whom he describes as hardened harlots, "the magnificent virago of the suppersshops" (Acton, 31), and the quiet self-effacing women who do not haunt the streets, but are prostitutes, nevertheless.³⁶ It is significant that those he

³⁴ Harrison, 252, gives a conventional reading of this passage, taking Acton at his word. Harrison interprets Acton at all times as setting up the dichotomy of asexual middle-class lady and depraved working-class prostitute.

³⁵ Acton was not alone in this argument. Hemyng too claimed that "some, perhaps the majority of them, eventually become comparatively respectable, and merge into the vast oceans of propriety" (Hemyng, 214), and found amongst the prostitutes he met that "one and all look forward to marriage and a certain state in society as their ultimate lot" (Hemyng, 216).

³⁶ Lynda Nead differentiates between the use of the term "prostitute" which she interprets as connoting "a public practice, the regular exchange of sex for money", and "fallen woman", which implies the woman was once respectable. Nead sees this as a class differentiation. However, as she notes, "the terms frequently overlapped and were not consistently held apart as terms of difference", 128. For Acton, even the fallen women were "in a state of prostitution" (Acton, 31). Equally, the presence of the "harlot" and "quean" disrupts and problematizes his argument for a sexually passive woman.

condemns are those who were heard, those who asserted themselves. To this "promiscuous category" belongs "the flaunting extravagant quean":

At thirty and at forty you will find her (if she rises in the scale) the loudest of the loud, in the utmost blaze of finery, looked on as "first-rate company" by aspiring gents, surrounded by a knot of "gentlemen" who applaud her rampant nonsense, and wondering, hotel-sick, country men of business, whose footsteps stray at night to where she keeps her foolish court. She is a sort of whitewashed sepulchre, fair to the eye, but full of inner rottenness - a mercenary human tigress. (Acton, 30)³⁷

What is most unnatural about such a woman is her public, voiced display. But less time is spent discussing these "light-minded" women, whose path downwards was seen to be inevitable, its end being "a drunken, brawling reprobate" (Acton, 30), than on the "softer-minded" woman, since she was more likely to make her way upwards and carry her disease back into society:

On the other hand, the sad career in prostitution of the softer-minded woman, in whatever rank she may be, will be marked and affected by that quality. Whatever befal [*sic*] her in this vale of tears, the gentle minded woman will be gentle still; and with this native hue will be tinged all her dealings with the sisterhood, and the rough rude males whom ever and anon it is her fate to meet. If fortunate enough to have the acquaintance of some quiet men of means, she will not be puffed up with vain-gloriousness, but seeking comfort in obscurity, and clinging fast to what respect she may gain of others, will profess - what I dare say she really often feels - disgust at brazen impudence, and all the pomps and vanities. Whether this eschewal be from real delicacy, or considerations of economy, or because any sort of notoriety, instead of cementing, as in the case of others mentioned, would be fatal to their particular *liaison*, it is hard to say; but, however that may be, it is no less true that hundreds of females so constituted are at this moment living within a few miles of Charing Cross, in easy if not elegant circumstances, with every regard to outward decorum and good

³⁷ The animal imagery of this whole passage is striking, as it was used to reinforce the animal, rather than human, nature of the woman of passion. She was a "tigress", who was, at times, enchanted by "some paltry bull dog", who "may light up all the fires of womanhood within her", that is, made her more "natural"; but mostly she associated with "the lodging-house sharks and other baser parasites that feed upon her" (Acton, 30).

taste, and shocking none of the public who will not attempt unnecessarily close investigation, but for all that "in a state of prostitution." The ease and comparative prosperity that inflates the lighter woman into a public nuisance have no such effect upon such a one as I have spoken of last. They but cause her to prize each day more highly peace and quietness - more sadly to regret the irrevocable past - more profoundly to yearn after some way out of the wilderness. (Acton, 31)

In this passage the private woman is privileged over the public, the silent over the voiced, and in this way, "the hundreds of females so constituted" are identified with their more respectable sisters. They fulfil the feminine ideals of the dominant ideology, and remain in the private domestic sphere. As Lynda Nead writes, such a woman "retained her femininity, that is, she remained powerless and dependent".³⁸

Prostitution, contagion, and social/sexual dis-ease

Quietness and the appearance of feminine respectability are stressed in order to break down the stereotype of the prostitute and to make the point that these women might be difficult to distinguish from other women of the reader's own social order. Acton tells of an "admirable description of a midnight meeting", where

a glance across the room would scarcely reveal the character of the assembly. Are these the "gay" and the "unfortunate," - the dashing courtezans or the starveling prostitutes of the West-end? They differ very little in appearance from as many women of "the middle and lower class" ... With few exceptions, there are no extravagant dresses, - still less are there any symptoms of levity or indecorum. Gravely and quietly, with self-respect and silent courtesy, the refreshments provided are consumed or declined ... (Acton, 262)

³⁸ Nead 96.

At the dance hall, Hemyng "was much struck by the way in which the various dances were executed. In the first place, the utmost decorum prevailed, nor did I notice the slightest tendency to indecency ... there was a certain innate delicacy about these women, too, highly commendable to its possessors. It was not the artificial refinement of the West-end, nothing of the sort, but genuine womanly feeling" (Hemyng, 229). Acton notes that the women one would meet at the dancing rooms

are of course all prostitutes. They are for the most part pretty, and quietly, though expensively dressed, while delicate complexions, unaccompanied by the pallor of ill-health, are neither few nor far between. This appearance is doubtless due in many cases to the artistic manner of the make-up by powder and cosmetics, on the employment of which extreme care is bestowed. Few of these women, probably, could write a decent letter, though some might be able to play a little on the piano, or to sing a simple song. Their behaviour is usually quiet, little solicitation is observable, and all the outward proprieties of demeanour and gesture are strictly observed. (Acton, 19)

To undermine the popular image, it is necessary for Acton to stress here the healthy appearance of the women although he also manages to subvert the tenor of his argument, by the implication that this is all it is, appearance, the outward show, that which can be observed. While these women act as middle-class daughters ought, quiet, simple, proper, it will be shown that others were more in keeping with what Acton wished to see - still "domesticated", but connecting prostitution and disease, sexuality and illness.

As I have already stated, the dominant metaphor in relation to prostitution was that of disease. The most obvious use of this metaphor concerned the idea of contagion and contamination, prostitution as a threat to the moral and social

health of the middle classes.³⁹ In their study of the body, urban topography and social formation, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out that "'contagion' and 'contamination' became the tropes through which city life was apprehended" by the middle classes, and "within this social and psychic economy, a key figure was the prostitute".⁴⁰ It is in this metaphoric sense that Hemyng wrote of prostitution: "hardly a parish in London is free from this impurity. Wherever the neighbourhood possesses peculiar charms, wherever the air is purer than ordinary, or the locality fashionably distinguished, these tubercles on the social system penetrate and abound" (Hemyng, 215). W. R. Greg, too, employed the metaphor when he berated statesmen who "act like the timid patient, who, fearing and feeling the existence of a terrible disease, dares not examine its symptoms or probe its depth, lest he should realise it too clearly, and possibly aggravate its intensity by the mere investigation" (448). Greg believed that in order to treat "so revolting a moral sore ... the evil must be probed with a courageous and unshrinking hand before a cure can be suggested, or palliatives can safely be applied" (Greg, 449).

However these were the more conventional uses of the metaphor. Where the idea of disease and illness is extended, it raises problems about the nature of women's sexuality. For in the use of this metaphor by Acton, a similar blurring of the boundaries to that of the natural and unnatural woman occurs. It is often hard to tell whether Acton was writing about the actual disease caught through sexual contact, or the metaphorical social or moral disease of prostitution. Lynda

³⁹ Lynda Nead discusses this use of the metaphor at length in the section of her book headed "Filth and Infection: Prostitution and the Language of Disease", 118-134, and relates it to the treatment of prostitution in Dickens's *David Copperfield*.

⁴⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 135, 137. However, in their depiction of the prostitute as other, as part of the grotesque carnivalesque body of the working classes by which the middle class constituted their own moral purity, Stallybrass and White do not see the ways in which gender is prioritized over class (when the prostitute is constructed as similar to the middle-class woman) nor the ensuing problematics of that position.

Nead makes this point in her discussion of disease and prostitution in general: "through this metaphoric language, the question of an association between prostitution and disease is erased and instead prostitution itself *is* the infection".⁴¹ However she does not develop the implications of this conflation for all female sexuality and its link with illness. At all times Nead stresses the difference between the sexual norm of the middle-class lady epitomized in the feminine ideal of womanhood, and prostitution as deviancy, threat and contagion. Nevertheless, although Acton emphasizes the health of prostitutes in order to dismantle the stereotype of the downward course of the fallen woman, "the harlot's progress", he does so through defining her sexuality, and by implication the sexuality of all women, in terms of disease.⁴² Certainly, the stereotypical, spiritually uplifting, invalid lady was a far cry from the disease-wasted fallen woman, but nevertheless, despite class differences, they were both definitions of women's sexuality through illness, representations of acceptable and unacceptable illness, and the underlying implication was that to be a woman was to be ill.⁴³

The connection of prostitution and disease in Acton's work is not surprising, since he was a physician whose purpose was to persuade the reader about the

⁴¹ Nead 122, emphasis in original.

⁴² Steven Marcus and others such as Harrison and Pearsall stress that Acton played down the amount of disease amongst prostitutes, and that he claimed they were healthier and stronger than many other working women. This seems to contradict my argument that the prostitute was constituted in terms of disease. However, I see it as an inherent contradiction within Acton's work, that although, for the purposes of his argument, a clean and healthy prostitute, regularly checked by law, was not such a social risk as a diseased one, he consistently defined her sexuality in terms of disease.

⁴³ Judith Walkowitz, in her discussion of venereal disease, points out a medical belief of the time that not only immoral, but virtuous women were implicated in the catching of gonorrhea, since it was said to be generated by vaginal discharge, irrespective of the morals of the woman. She sees this as "contradicting the ideological association of disease and sinful habits", and further argues that "this virtuous source of infection also challenged the sexual-moral code that rigidly segregated 'pure' women from the 'impure'. By designating all women as potential pollutants of men and reservoirs of infection, it evoked instead a more general hostility and dread of females and female 'nature'". Walkowitz 56.

extension of the Contagious Diseases Act.⁴⁴ Yet the image was well-established and widespread, belonging to more than medical discourse, and had important implications. If prostitutes represented disease, actual, social or moral, and if all women were potential prostitutes, then all women could represent disease. This conflation of terms is evident when Acton describes the women at the pleasure gardens:

As to the costumes of the company I have little more to say, than that pretty and quiet dressing was almost universal, and painted cheeks a rarity; but one or two physical characteristics seem worth mentioning. I saw many an etiolated eye and blanched chlorotic complexion, due to the want of sun and air, and general defibrinization, but *not more noticeable here than in Mayfair*.
(Acton, 19, emphasis added)

However the “deplorable hectic flush” and “prevalence of sunken eyes, drawn features, and thin lips” are to be attributed “not so much (as is the vulgar error) to the practice of prostitution, as to the dancing mania, which has been the only remarkable change of late years in their mode of life” as well as the effect of other social factors upon *naturally delicate or defective organizations*” (Acton, 19, Emphasis added). The link is thus established between the prostitute in ill health and the society lady of Mayfair, between the causes of that ill health and both the social whirl and the seemingly natural propensities of a woman’s body, which could be shared alike by both the prostitute and the lady.

In his definition of the prostitute Acton again conflates the social, moral and physical implications of disease. She is a woman who, “degraded and fallen[,] ... extracts from the sin of others the means of living, corrupt and dependent on corruption, and therefore interested directly in the increase of immorality - a

⁴⁴ For further reading on Acton’s role in the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act, and a discussion of the importance of this Act as a means of controlling working-class sexuality, see Walkowitz, chapter 4.

social pest, carrying contamination and foulness to every quarter to which she has access, who -

'like a disease,
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd.'" (Acton, 166)

Once again, she is both literally the carrier of disease, and figuratively "like a disease". Deceptive of appearance, "she is a sort of whitewashed sepulchre, fair to the eye, but full of inner rottenness" (Acton, 30). Prostitution itself is described as "a contagious and deadly disorder" for which only "concentrated effort, sanctioned by authority" would effect "a moral cure" (Acton, ix). Yet Acton stresses the need for rehabilitation of the prostitute for "the great mass of prostitutes in this country are in the course of time absorbed into the so-called respectable classes" and "in proportion as they are assisted or neglected during their evil days will they assume the characters of wives and mothers with a greater or lesser degree of *unsoundness in their bodies and pollution in their minds*" (Acton, xi, emphasis added).

Wives and mothers, unsoundness and pollution: because of the essentializing of women's desire for marriage and maternity, a desire which was seen natural to all women as the expression of their sexuality, the potential rehabilitation of the prostitute therefore can be seen as the focus of the problematics of that sexuality. If prostitutes were seemingly indistinguishable from respectable middle-class women, in their outward appearances, habits, and innate characteristics, and their sexuality was defined in terms of disease and contagion, that is, in terms of illness, what did that imply for the sexuality of the middle-class woman? The prostitute was not so much her other, as her double.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Mary Poovey reaches a somewhat different conclusion. She argues that in works such as Greg's class inequality is subordinated to gender similarity, and social distress is transformed into a question of morality. Further, immorality has become "a function of sexual difference and

According to Foucault, the work of producing truth had to pass through the relationship of speaker and listener, the relationship within the confession, if it was to be scientifically validated. Truth "was constituted in two stages: present but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who spoke it, it could only reach completion in the one who assimilated and recorded it" (66). In this chapter I have looked at the ways in which the truth about women's sexuality was produced through the debate on prostitution. By a variety of methods, not only traditional scholarship, but increasingly by those methods of interview and analysis, by direct investigation of the subjects of inquiry, that is, scientific methods given a sociological direction, the truth of women's sexuality was constructed. The function of investigators such as Acton, Mayhew and Hemyng was that of decipherment. As Foucault writes, "by no longer making the confession a test, but rather a sign, and by making sexuality something to be interpreted, the nineteenth century gave itself the possibility of causing procedures of confession to operate within the regular formation of a scientific discourse" (67). But in this decipherment of the signs of women's sexuality we must also look at the play of gender and class. Women's sexuality was produced as the construct of male discourse. Although the discussion of prostitution centred for the most part on working-class women, women who were ostensibly different from the middle-class lady, the signs which were read and reproduced in the texts were those of the construct of middle-class sexuality, of woman's desire fulfilled through maternity and self-abnegation. But because the

unnatural domestic arrangements". Thus she concludes "the image of society that results from these transformations is a laissez-faire system of moral and class relations in which, if left alone, the natural difference between the sexes will "cure" social unrest by checking immorality, which causes both disorder and disease. Put women in their proper place, the argument suggests, and social stability will follow", "Speaking of the Body" 34. While I agree that gender similarities are emphasized so that class difference can be displaced and made apparently unimportant, and that Greg was seeking some social "cure", I see the implications of the stress on similarity as being disruptive of the middle-class equanimity with which Acton and Greg wrote.

prostitute was no longer other, but alike, and because her sexuality was also produced in terms of disease and contagion, this problematized the nature of the middle-class woman's sexuality. As with the discourse of the medicine of reproduction, so the discourse on prostitution constructed women's sexuality in terms of illness.

Chapter 3

Spoken in the words of men - appropriating a discourse of power

I know not how it may affect others, but the number of languid, listless, and inert young ladies, who now recline upon our sofas, murmuring and repining at every claim upon their personal exertions, is to me a truly melancholy spectacle, and one which demands the attention of a benevolent and enlightened public, even more perhaps, than some of those great national schemes in which the people and the government are alike interested. Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England, their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, 1839.¹

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.²

When we expand our concept of the political further even than Foucault's, we discover grounds on which to argue that the modern household rather than the clinic provided the proto-institutional setting where government through relentless supervision first appeared, and appeared in its most benevolent guise. Nancy Armstrong, "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity".³

In reading the works of women writing in the nineteenth century, feminist criticism has made much of authorial and textual subversion.⁴ But what of the

¹ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England, their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (London, 1839) 83.

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 194.

³ Nancy Armstrong, "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity", *The Other Perspective in Gender and Culture: Rewriting Women and the Symbolic*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell (New York and Oxford: Columbia UP, 1990) 67.

⁴ Such responses range from the palimpsestic traces of female rage in Gilbert and Gubar's *Mad Woman in the Attic*, through the marxist analyses of Judith Lowder Newton's *Women, Power and Subversion*, and the search for a female tradition by Elaine Showalter, to the psychoanalytic theorizing of Mary Jacobus, and Foucauldian constructs of Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments*. Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (New York and London: Methuen, 1981); Mary Jacobus ed., *Women Writing and Writing about*

women who wrote within the discourse of the separate spheres, upholding and furthering its ideology? For many women the ideology of the separate spheres went unquestioned since it was very attractive. Within her own sphere the woman might be, in Ruskin's words, a "queen". Constituted by discourses both of gender and class, the middle-class woman's realm of power was limited, and still subject to the ultimate control of men, but it was, nevertheless, a form of power, especially in terms of her class.⁵ One woman who has been frequently cited for her restrictive and prescriptive advice to women, and who exemplified the female appropriation of patriarchal discourse was Sarah Stickney Ellis.⁶

The construction of the domestic woman and the ideology of the separate spheres was the production of various discourses rather than a monolithic narrative. It had been gradual in its evolution, through seventeenth and eighteenth century treatises on philosophy and economy, conduct and advice books, and literature, especially the domestic novel.⁷ Nancy Armstrong traces

Women (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989).

⁵ For an historical study of the ideology of the separate spheres and its empowerment of women, see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977). Of this kind of feminist revisionary history, Lois McNay has recently commented that "without wanting to underestimate the effects of the apparatus of regulatory practices brought to bear on women in the nineteenth century, feminist historians have attempted to show how, within the oppressive constraints that operate around ideas of femininity, there are contradictions and instabilities which, at times, have provided women with a base from which to undermine the very system which constricts them", McNay 42.

⁶ See, for example, Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982) 101-3; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, William Veeder eds., *The Woman Question: Defining Voices, 1837-1883*, Vol. I of *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883* (New York and London: Garland, 1983). A more astute reading of Ellis's work is made by Janet Horowitz Murray: "Mrs. Ellis stressed submissiveness and empathetic concern for the needs of others, yet there was also a hint of shrewd self-interest in her bland exhortations to keep men happily dependent on the daily ministrations of their sisters or wives". Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong-minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 101.

⁷ I use the term "conduct book" to encompass a wide range of discourses, but include those books which, through their advice on manners, etiquette, and appropriate behaviour, were productive of a certain kind of truth about the nature and interaction of men and women, defining both gender and class. Most research into this kind of writing has so far concentrated on works prior to the

the construction of the domestic woman as the object of desire, and the way in which conduct books took over from Renaissance courtesy books on aristocratic manners, and proliferated especially in the eighteenth century.⁸ For Armstrong the rise of the conduct book preceded and paralleled the development of the novel, and shadowed it in the production of the desirable and desired domestic woman. The figure of this woman, a creature of essential purity, delicacy, and self-regulation, one who displayed the same qualities as the puritan man but manifested them in the domestic sphere, provided a focus of identity for as yet disunited social groupings, widely divergent in their social, economic, and political interests. Her virtuous form was a unifying force, on the horizontal plane of gender, for groups who were still widely divided on the vertical axis of social hierarchy, and the interests of the public world of men. Thus, according to Armstrong's persuasive hypothesis, the figure of the domestic woman, created in opposition both to the ornamental aristocratic woman who was important for her ties of family and wealth, and to the lower class working woman, emerged prior to the formulation of the class identity which would become the bourgeoisie. She, and the ideal household which she symbolized, could encompass oppositions of town and country, urban manufacturing and rural

nineteenth century, especially those of the Renaissance. However, both the critical works I describe below bring the conduct book up to the nineteenth century. In the later nineteenth century, advice books for women focus less on conduct and more on household management, moving from personal virtues into the practical sphere. See Elizabeth Langland, "Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel" *PMLA* 107.2 (1992): 292 ff. for a discussion of the shift from conduct books to books of social etiquette between the early and mid-nineteenth century. This shift in emphasis, I would argue, marks the development described by Nancy Armstrong (following Foucault), of "countless microtechniques of socialization" which the middle class deployed, by the "surveillance, observation, evaluation, and remediation" of private life, and which in the second half of the nineteenth century, became inscribed in institutions - such as the production and regulation of etiquette through manuals of correct behaviour. Armstrong, "Some Call it Fiction" 69.

⁸ Nancy Armstrong, "The rise of the domestic woman", *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays in literature and the history of sexuality*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 96-141. Armstrong's essay in this work is taken from chapter two of Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (London and New York: Oxford UP 1987).

agrarian groups, or middle class and gentry. By the nineteenth century and the rise of bourgeois hegemonic ideology, she was already accepted as “natural”.

What the conduct book provided was a gendered discourse, one that was distinctly feminine, and the falling off in the production of conduct books by the end of the eighteenth century does not mean that they went out of fashion. Armstrong argues that, by that time, the ideas expressed in conduct books had entered the realm of common sense. Where Samuel Richardson took a hundred pages to detail the new domesticity and the modern household, Jane Austen could merely sketch, relying on her readers’ acceptance of the everyday, and their knowledge of the codes of conduct to which she was alluding.⁹

While concentrating more on the heroines of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel, Ruth Bernard Yeazell explores the conduct books to trace the development of the “modest” woman where Armstrong reviewed the same literature to discover the production of the domestic woman.¹⁰ Both see the conduct books as a gendered space, allowing for the construction of a certain kind of sexuality. For Yeazell, the modest woman became a convention in fiction, and the language of modesty was a codification of certain behaviours which allowed the young woman a period of courtship where she had time to observe and contemplate, while at the same time her modesty imbued her with a muted eroticism in order to attract the right husband. Modesty was a virtue, and like virtue became associated almost entirely with sexuality. It entailed both the effacement and the enhancement of the body, as, for the modest woman, her simple covering clothes were deemed more attractive than blatant nakedness. The modest woman, according to Yeazell, was constructed between two opposing

⁹ Armstrong, “Domestic woman” 100.

¹⁰ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1991).

figures - the prude who expressed more modesty than she had, and the coquette, who did not express enough. Thus the modest woman was the one who instinctively knew the mean, like Armstrong's domestic woman who walked the path of frugality, discretion, and self-regulation. Yet this instinctive, natural modesty was troublesome, since paradoxically it needed constant vigilance in order to preserve it. Thus woman was seen to be instinctively modest yet at the same time possessing a potentially disruptive natural lust.¹¹ For Yeazell the conduct books testified to the belief that instinct must be elaborately codified and endlessly discussed in order to preserve woman from her other nature.¹² She believes that the gendering of modesty followed from the separation of the spheres, "a division of labor that will increasingly free men for the aggressions of the marketplace by assigning certain "beautiful" but inconvenient virtues to the safekeeping of women".¹³ Modesty was inscribed upon the body - the downcast eyes, the blushing cheek - yet the literature expressed the undercurrent of fear that this was mere seeming. Like Armstrong's domestic woman, Yeazell's modest woman must be read for her depths, for "particularly when a woman's modesty is understood as a sexual virtue, the lingering fear that she has merely veiled over the original immodesty of her sex continues to trouble those who sing her praises".¹⁴

The literature of modesty was, according to Yeazell, a literature about marriage. The modest woman, like Armstrong's domestic woman, would be the best wife. And, like Armstrong, Yeazell claims that by the end of the eighteenth century this view was a commonplace, needing no explanation: "Between

¹¹ For examples of this argument, see Edward Tilt's discussion of the dangers of the internal examination of woman patients, in Chapter 1, and W. R. Greg's "Prostitution" as discussed in Chapter 2.

¹² Yeazell, *Fictions* 5.

¹³ Yeazell, *Fictions* 9.

¹⁴ Yeazell, *Fictions* 11.

Allestree [1670s] and Ellis [1840s], the literature of modesty was in large part a literature that sought to advise women on how best to get themselves chosen, men how best to choose, and both parties that an affectionate marriage was itself the most satisfying goal of life".¹⁵ Thus, I would argue, desire was rewritten, inscribed upon the passive body of the woman, sexuality reconstructed by the repression of one side of the paradox of woman's "nature".

Sarah Ellis: of illness and health, ladies and women

By the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, a woman who chose to write conduct books was no longer engaging in a discourse of primary production, so to speak. She was entering a terrain that was already well-mapped, its landmarks obvious and taken for granted. Sarah Stickney Ellis, as a conduct book writer, never questioned what she believed to be the underlying laws of the nature of men and women. Her four best known works, *The Women of England*, *The Mothers of England*, *The Wives of England*, and *The Daughters of England*, always assume the authority of both God and nature for creating the sexes distinctly different, men superior to women.¹⁶ The ideological structures of the separate spheres are never questioned within her texts. Nevertheless, her work can be read as a form of appropriation of discourse, the carving out of a space for women to speak, what Foucault would call, the "reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives".¹⁷ By taking the words of men, she took men at their word, believing the patriarchal ideology of woman's separate but important

¹⁵ Yeazell, *Fictions* 33.

¹⁶ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England*, and *The Mothers of England*, *their Influence and Responsibility* (London, 1843), *The Wives of England*, *their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (London, 1843), *The Daughters of England*, *their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (London, 1845). All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text, after the title "Women", "Mothers" etc. For a discussion of Ellis's life and works see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) 180-185.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol. 1 100.

guiding role. Ellis spoke in a voice which became more and more important for women in the feminist movement as the century progressed. From the domestic sphere could arise the "truth" which came to be known by the name of another conduct book, by Sarah Lewis - "Woman's mission".¹⁸

Conduct books, of themselves, present a fundamental paradox. If the books were written on the assumption that woman's nature is fixed and given, what then could be the need for books which also assume that women (and men) can be produced, shaped, and trained? The repressed counter assumption, repressed because of its inherent contradiction, is that the nature of woman is suspect. The fear of woman's transgression was so great that the necessity of a surveillant discourse arose. In dealing with woman and the conduct of her body, Ellis was faced with a dilemma, which is, on the textual level, to do with authoring and authority, and her own transgressive step into the public sphere of publishing. Women, in her view, are ill suited to authority in that they are weaker, physically, and yet they are responsible for the physical and moral health of the family and thus of the nation. The oppositions of illness and of health are persistent in her work. On the one hand "by absolute and mere authority it is little indeed that woman can do because the weakness of her bodily frame, and the natural susceptibility of her feelings, render her wholly unfit for wielding the weapon of authority to any useful purpose" (*Mothers*, 41). On the other hand, "it is a fact universally acknowledged, that the healthy tone of the domestic atmosphere, as well as the general cheerfulness of the household, depend very much upon the mother" (*Mothers*, 44). This healthy tone could be achieved

¹⁸ Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (London, 1839). See Helsinger et al., Chapter 1, 3-20, for a discussion of Lewis's work. It was books such as these that Florence Nightingale so resoundingly disparaged in *Cassandra* (Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey (London, Pickering and Chatto, 1991) 214, 229). Nevertheless, Nightingale herself employs tropes of the family and woman's maternal role to appropriate power for women outside of the domestic realm in a way not dissimilar to Ellis. The idle lady that Nightingale so much despised is also condemned by Ellis. It is in their remedies that they are so different, but nevertheless both recommended some form of work.

through "influence". The woman's body, therefore, is negated in order to valorize more abstract qualities of character. As Armstrong found in earlier books of this type, it was not the surface that counted but the presumed depths. Although a woman's desires are said to be instinctive, and so of the body, they are directed towards motherhood. For Ellis the body is fragmented and gendered. Where men are the head, women are the heart.

Nevertheless, although she spoke of woman's weakness and physical inability to exert authority, she herself spoke with a voice of authority. The tone of her work is both paternalistic, that of the wise parent, as well as motherly. As a woman she could speak out because it is right for mothers to guide the moral health of their children, who could be, by extension, her readers. Thus she brings the domestic into the public sphere and appropriates authority in the guise of moral influence. When she writes about the training of boys, she makes a case for the necessity of women to be seen by their sons as competent intellectually, good at public conversation, holding opinions of valuable consideration and so on. In doing this she has of necessity to make the domestic of lesser importance, because she believes it is so in the eyes of boys, although, we note, not in those of men, who appreciate domesticity once they have homes of their own. A woman's domestic role, of good management and common sense, is therefore important but lesser, important so long as it remains invisible and silent. What is more important is her public voice, in the training of worthwhile sons, who will not only be responsible men, but also grow up respectful of women, especially those of intellect:

Seeing all this so frequently exhibited as we do, in the familiar aspect of our social and domestic affairs, it becomes a matter of astonishment and regret, that mothers should allow themselves to sink into such apparent indifference about their intellectual influence over their children, and especially their sons - that they should allow themselves to settle down into mere household

machines, or the automatons of an occasional party, when the temporal and eternal interests of their sons may perhaps be hanging upon the respect which they inspire in their opening and susceptible minds. (*Mothers*, 294)

It would seem therefore that Ellis's argument was necessary to authorize her own discourse, to make her own voice worthy of public pronouncement. For example, how could she, as a woman, break the bounds of modesty to talk of the vices that might tempt young men, when she claims that women know but little of the world and could not be aware of how attractive vice might be (*Mothers*, 315)? It might be claimed as well that she authorizes her work by speaking directly to the domestic sphere. Women are her assumed audience, an assumption verified when she takes time to address men directly, by way of an apology. Ellis hopes that it might "be deemed pardonable for a woman to solicit the serious attention of her own sex" for her subject matter, "the minor morals of domestic life" and their influence on English character, is of direct relevance to women, since it is "over this sphere of duty it is [their] peculiar province to preside" (*Women*, 39). Nevertheless, she felt the need not to appear transgressive, and to forestall criticism, by a direct appeal to men, a move which allows her words to stand as authoritative, while she herself, by her demurral, is non-threateningly demure:

Aware that the word *preside*, used as it is here, may produce a startling effect upon the ear of man, I must endeavour to bespeak his forbearance, by assuring him, that the highest aim of the writer does not extend beyond the act of warning the women of England back to their domestic duties, in order that they may become better wives, more useful daughters, and mothers, who by their example shall bequeath a rich inheritance to those who follow in their steps. (*Women*, 40, emphasis in original)

But, as the world of the domestic sphere infiltrates the public, so, in this apparently innocent way, is the language of the public appropriated for the

domestic. The worlds of business and home are not totally discrete spheres, but connected by linguistic overlapping. Women can learn that:

as the man engaged in business does not run hither and thither, simply to make a show of alacrity, neither does the woman engaged in a higher and more important work, allow herself to be satisfied with her own willingness to do her duty, without a diligent and persevering investigation of what are the most effectual means by which it can be done. (*Women*, 176)

Later in the century Isabella Beeton would employ a similar strategy in the first paragraph of her work on Household Management: "as with the commander of an army, or the leader of any enterprise, so it is with the mistress of a house".¹⁹ Domestic work took on the authority of managerial status.

Yet, although the work of the domestic sphere is constructed as "higher and more important", for Ellis the very tasks in the household which have to be invisible to boys, have to appear attractive to girls, and to be so they too are described in terms used more frequently in the public sphere. Such chores are "brisk and healthy exercise", which achieves "the natural satisfaction of despatching business, and the pleasant idea of being useful" (*Mothers*, 334).

¹⁹ Isabella Beeton, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861, London: Chancellor Press, 1985) 1. See Langland 295, for a discussion of the importance of class over gender in such constructions in Beeton. Langland also points out, 298-9, how Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" engages in a similar discourse, transforming women's social and political powers into essentialist traits of womanly nature, for a woman's sweetness is predicated upon her ability for "ordering, arrangement and decision". Mary Poovey sees Beeton's statement as an example of the aggressiveness contained in the domestic ideal. (Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 170.) In "A Housewifely Woman: The Social Construction of Florence Nightingale", Poovey investigates the way in which the domestic ideal (the figure of the ministering angel) and the ideal of military heroism (a figure of resolute fearlessness) merge in the public perception of Florence Nightingale. Poovey claims that "the military narrative was always at least compatible with - if not implicit in - the domestic narrative" (169). Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, describes the use of the military analogy in the constitution of new practices within education, medicine, and the work place. Beeton's regulatory advice, summarized in her maxim "a place for everything and everything in its place", certainly follows Foucault's model. However, unlike the school, the hospital or the factory, the home was complicated in terms of gender, by being marked as feminine. The military analogy in Beeton, or that of the business world in Ellis, had, therefore, to confer authority without masculinizing, and, in fact, produced a form of "strong" femininity. This was precisely what Ruskin was doing with his "sweet order".

Moreover, from the rhetorical emphasis of the text, one gets the feeling that the reason why it is necessary to explain how these tasks could be made attractive, is that they are not. "How is it", Ellis asks, "so many mothers of domestic habits themselves, complain that their daughters cannot be made to attend to household concerns?" (*Mothers*, 333). She continues her argument with an undermining double negative: "There is no reason, that I can imagine, why household duties should not be attractive ..." (*Mothers*, 334), and another question: "But how is it, we ask again, that young ladies have such an unconquerable repugnance to this kind of occupation?" (*Mothers*, 335). Repeating "making nobody comfortable" four times in one sentence, she finishes by berating those women who are too busy being zealous housekeepers that they make the household very uncomfortable for its occupants. In all, the negative side of domesticity takes up more space than that dealing with its attractions and the correct way to behave.

This passage on domestic chores highlights one of the problems in Ellis's text. In her production of a harmonious unified ideal, the good woman, the deferential wife, the loving mother or the dutiful daughter, she constantly refers to, as negative examples, those who do not reach that ideal. The ideal of motherhood that Ellis and others constructed was, according to Sally Shuttleworth, both regulatory and prohibitive, especially in the requirements that women provide enough but not excess, of motherly love for example. For Shuttleworth, such imperatives could construct women as both angels and demons:

As physical body, vehicle of reproduction of the nation's wealth, the middle-class woman was subjected to extreme regulation. Failure to adhere to the strict regimes laid down by the medical

establishment would lead to ideological reclassification: angel no longer, but a source of corruption and poison.²⁰

She points out, as I have elsewhere, that the line between middle-class woman and working-class prostitute was, in discursive terms, very thin, since the existing discourse of woman as a source of corruption and pollution crossed class boundaries.²¹ While I cannot deny that Ellis's intention was normative and restrictive, I would also argue that in Ellis's work a source of power for women was constructed through motherhood, within the very constraints that were externally imposed. Nevertheless, the ideological conflicts and contradictions that Shuttleworth exposes in the literary, "scientific", and regulatory discourses of the time are there in Ellis, and produce a similar destabilizing effect to undermine the certainties of her position. In Ellis's text, however, the prostitute is resoundingly absent. Her ideal angelic woman is opposed to imps rather than demons, the negative examples mentioned above. These dissident others constantly disrupt the text as another kind of "reality", undermining the credibility of the ideal figure, and producing a form of textual dis-ease. What seem more "real" in the text, perhaps because they were more recognizable, are the grumbling wife, the unruly son, the cantankerous husband, and the daughter who reads novels in secret.

If it is natural for women to be loving, good, self-effacing and restrained, Ellis has to account for her exceptions. Like medical writers and others, she does so by blaming society for perverting nature. People are influenced by "the artificial habits of the present day" (*Mothers*, 323), inadequate education, or urban life. "False notions of refinement" are "rendering [women] less influential, less

²⁰ Sally Shuttleworth, "Demonic mothers: Ideologies of bourgeois motherhood in the mid-Victorian era", *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (London: Routledge, 1992) 37.

²¹ Shuttleworth, "Demonic mothers" 41. See Chapter 2 above on the mid-century debate on prostitution.

useful, and less happy than they were" (*Women*, 10). Modern society produces the kind of woman who is "a stickler for rights" (*Wives*, 103). The previous century had seen a decline in standards, for although there had been an increase in "mental improvement" it had not been combined with "moral discipline":

When the cultivation of the mental faculties had so far advanced as to take precedence of the moral, by leaving no time for domestic usefulness, and the practice of personal exertion in the way of promoting general happiness, the character of the Women of England assumed a different aspect, which is now beginning to tell upon society in the sickly sensibilities, the feeble frames, and the useless habits of the rising generation. (*Women*, 11)

In Ellis's construction of the domestic ideal, one of the most problematic figures is that of the ill woman. Ellis was caught in a paradoxical situation. She believed on the one hand that "woman is naturally and necessarily weak in comparison with man" (*Mothers*, 328), and that she has to "bear without complaining the trials of a constitution always more or less subject to infirmity" (*Mothers*, 327). To be a woman is, by nature and by God's will, to be ill. Yet Ellis's ideal woman would also be healthy.²² In her advice to mothers "on the training of girls" (*Mothers*, chapter XI), the first topic she broaches is that of health. It is not only for boys that the dictum of a healthy mind in a healthy body should apply. Girls need "the stimulus of healthy and playful exercise" for "the musing, quiet, listless little girl, though possibly she may in her early life be more gentle and ladylike than the other [energetic girl], seldom grows up to be so useful and valuable a character". Overt passivity, therefore, only seems to be feminine, the result of a false ideal in society. Modern education provides only "the over-

²² Shuttleworth sees Ellis's emphasis on health as a pointer to the eugenics movement of the late nineteenth-century. The woman as mother must of necessity be responsible for the physical and moral well-being of the (middle-class) nation, hence Ellis lauded the regulatory woman rather than the idle lady. Shuttleworth does not investigate, however, the problem Ellis faced in perceiving women as inherently ill and weak. Nor does she take into account the difference between the voices of men and women, and the question I ask - what difference does it make that Ellis, as a woman, is reiterating these terms? Shuttleworth, "Demonic mothers" 35.

straining of talent and ability of every kind in the attainment of what is merely ornamental and superficial", and has "the worst possible effect upon the bodily as well as the mental health of woman". A mother, therefore, has amongst her most important duties, to preserve her daughters "from that host of nervous maladies which effectually destroy the happiness, and prevent the usefulness, of so many ladies in the present day" (*Mothers*, 323). Of what use, as a prospective bride, is "the young lady, with her ill health, and music lessons" (*Wives*, 35), her illness apparently yet another of her accomplishments? Ellis laments that

the greater portion of the young ladies (for they are no longer *women*) of the present day, are distinguished by a morbid listlessness of mind and body, except when under the influence of stimulus, a constant pining for excitement, and an eagerness to escape from every thing like practical and individual duty. ... But this state of listless indifference, my sisters, must not be. You have deep responsibilities, you have urgent claims; a nation's moral wealth is in your keeping. (*Women*, 12, emphasis in original)

In Ellis's construction of womanhood to be of use is of paramount importance. A femininity which constructed women as "gentle, inoffensive, delicate, and passively amiable" (*Women*, 12) is disabling, a form of delusion which gives a woman "the notion that a multiplicity of little ailments invested her character with an interesting kind of delicacy" (*Wives*, 167). Ellis distinguishes women of this kind by the name of "ladies", a label which holds implications of false gentility and the idle dissipation of the aristocracy. Such women do not cultivate "habits of usefulness, or a healthy tone of mind" (*Women*, 94), but are "lovely burdens" in "still-life attitudes" who "clogged" and "impeded" "the great machine of human life and action", and "who cast themselves about on every hand, in the vain hopes of being valued and admired for doing nothing" (*Women*, 106). Ellis uses oppositions of natural and unnatural, health and illness, as well as the image of the machine with its positive connotations of the industrious industrial middle-class world of

business and progress to constitute women as an essential part of that world.²³ Women might be inferior physically, but they are necessary. If society is a machine, women who fulfil "their ambition to be *women*" are there to "fill a place, and occupy a post - members of the commonwealth - supporters of the fabric of society, - the minor wheels and secret springs" in that machine (*Women*, 106, emphasis in original). If a woman indulges in minor ailments before marriage, "the sooner she becomes perfectly well after marriage, the better it will be for herself, and for all around her" (*Wives*, 167).

Moreover, because of their special abilities, women are in some ways stronger than men. For Ellis, the separation of the spheres enabled women to utilize what she saw as their special powers. Those who call for equality are ignorant and foolhardy. The different natures of men and women are "the perfect adjustment of the plans of an all-wise Providence". To call for equality is "an ignorant and vulgar contest" which would lose the "utility" and "perfection" (*Wives*, 81) of God's ordained differentiation of the sexes. What women have to realize, according to Ellis, is their necessary place in this scheme, because of the underlying weakness of men and women's resourcefulness and strength:

Could the gay and thoughtless daughters of England know for what situations they are training. - Could they know how often it will become their duty to assume the character of the strong, in order to support the weak, they would surely begin betimes to think of these things. ... And after all, this great dignity of man, is not much of it artificial, or at least put on like a robe of state to answer an especial end? Yes; and a pitiful and heart-rending spectacle it is, to see the weakness of man's heart disrobed of all its mantling pride - the utter nakedness, I might almost say, for woman has ever something left

²³ Nancy Armstrong, in "History in the House of Culture: Social Disorder and Domestic Fiction in Early Victorian England", *Poetics Today* 7 4 (1986) 657-659, traces the process by which the idea of the machine changed from being in opposition to nature to being an extension and perfection of it, a "rhetorical inversion that made mechanization the solution to the problems it produced". She writes that "such an image mingles the languages of technology and medicine so that one mode of analysis can be used to describe mechanical and natural objects alike" (658). I see this process at work in Ellis's text.

to conceal her destitution. In the multitude of her resources she has also a multitude of alleviations to her distress; but a man has nothing. (*Wives*, 89)

It would seem therefore, that Ellis overturns the very hierarchy that she appears to be endorsing. However, within her construction of difference, woman must pay the price in silence; hers must be a hidden strength:

When her husband chooses to be dignified again, and is capable of maintaining that dignity, she must adapt herself to the happy change, and fall back into comparative insignificance, just as if the circumstances had never given her a momentary superiority over him. (*Wives*, 91)

Elsewhere too, Ellis obscures the issues of superiority and refuses to endorse overtly the public over the private sphere. "I do not - I will not believe", she states vehemently, "that women are inferior to what is called the noble sex, in the moral world", even if they are physically weaker (*Women*, 351). She argues that:

I say nothing here about the superiority in one, and inferiority in the other; because I consider that to be an idle question, since nothing can be good, and consequently nothing can be superior, except in proportion as it answers the end for which it was created. There are writers, however, and not a few, in the present day, who maintain that both have equal powers, and are fitted for the same field of action. Without endeavouring to combat an opinion so opposed at once to nature and religion, to philosophy and common sense, I would just ask, whether women who faithfully perform their duties, have not at present enough to do in their accustomed and familiar place? (*Mothers*, 281)

We are brought back once again to the notion of utility, and the need, for the woman, if she is to perform her duties "faithfully", to maintain her physical

health and strength to allow her moral health and strength.²⁴ Through her essential “infirmity”, by which we should assume her reproductive functions, the “illness” of menstruation, woman is by nature weak, tied to her body. It is her duty, therefore, to be strong and healthy in order to be able to overcome her body and fulfil her moral functions. She has to cultivate the body in order to forget it. “I know”, Ellis writes, “that woman is naturally and necessarily weak in comparison with man ... but I would ask for her, in common kindness, that she should not be rendered weaker than is necessary by an education artificial, unhealthy, and unnatural” (*Mothers*, 328). To be ill, therefore, was natural, but to give in to that illness was unnatural.

For Ellis, femininity is powerful, but always undermined by a false gentility which she believes prevails in society, where women are brought up to believe that their weakness makes them desirable. She shows little sympathy for the figure of the ill woman, or women who are not useful:

The plea of want of ability [to attend to children rather than morning calls, charities etc] is a strong condemnation to her who did not find this out in time; and that of want of health, though, unlike the others, deserving of tenderness and sympathy, affords no reason for entire exemption except in extreme cases; because a mother's influence, if once established, is often known to operate beneficially, even when she herself is confined to a couch of sickness. (*Mothers*, 67)

Education of the heart

The woman constructed by Ellis, therefore, is the true woman, her femininity a true femininity, stripped back to its essential nature, free of the

²⁴ Shuttleworth perceives this utility in terms of reproduction: “From a biological definition, ‘womanhood’ has been transformed into a class-based moral assessment, but one that was nonetheless founded on the quality of biological performance with regard to reproduction”, “Demonic mothers” 35.

trappings and artifice of modern urban fashionable society. But despite her emphasis on the modest, self-effacing domestic woman, Ellis considers this woman a site of power. What Ellis establishes is a moral economy to parallel the moneyed economy of men:

It is not to be presumed that women possess more moral power than men; but happily for them, such are their early impressions, associations, and general position in the world, that their moral feelings are less liable to be impaired by the pecuniary objects which too often constitute the chief end of man, and which, even under the limitations of better principle, necessarily engage a large portion of his thoughts. (*Women*, 50)

The “world”, the public domain of business and commerce comes between men and their religious duty. Women, being in a more “natural” state, could be the mediators, since even “humble-minded women” could have “a [clear] sense of the right and wrong of individual actions” (*Women*, 51). Man, prey to weakness, open to “the snares of the world” (*Women*, 53), concerned primarily with the “potent - (I had almost said the *omnipotent*) consideration of worldly aggrandisement” (*Women*, 51, emphasis in original), could be redeemed by the domestic ideal, as he “thought of the humble mistress who sat alone guarding the fireside comforts of his distant home; and the remembrance of her character, clothed in moral beauty”. She is “a kind of second conscience, for mental reference, and spiritual counsel, in moments of trial” (*Women*, 53). Women provide a moral plenitude to counter the lack in men. When a son “proved, beyond all possibility of deception, that he is not sufficient of himself to carry out a single good resolution”, it is “the blessed privilege of the mother” (*Mothers*, 317) to provide guidance.

Thus the need for the domestic realm is essential to harmony, order, and a sense of completion, in the outer public world. Women are at the heart of

society and it is their duty to oversee the “education of the heart”. Ellis’s first enunciation of this idea was made in her early works, but it was elaborated upon at length in *Education of the Heart: Woman’s Best Work*, published in 1869, and written in response to the debate on higher education for women.²⁵ Ellis drew upon a long tradition associating woman, especially the mother, and the heart. From writers such as Locke and Rousseau, a new discourse of the early education of children and the role of the mother in creating affective ties and moral awareness mapped out the boundaries of the modern middle-class family and the domestic sphere.²⁶ But more specifically, Ellis echoed writers such as Maria Edgeworth, who in collaboration with her father, published the very influential *Practical Education* in 1801. This work was introduced with the claim that “with respect to what is commonly called the education of the heart, we have endeavoured to suggest the easiest means of inducing useful and agreeable habits, well regulated sympathy and benevolent affections”.²⁷ According to Armstrong, the Edgeworths’ programme “substitutes abstract terms of emotion and behavior for those of one’s specific socioeconomic identity”, and by placing emphasis on the schoolroom and the domestic realm for the regulation of behaviour, Ellis perpetuated this construct of education.

In *Education of the Heart*, Ellis reiterates most of the key ideas she had expressed in *Women and Mothers of England*. She establishes early in the text

²⁵ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *Education of the Heart: Woman’s Best Work* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1869). All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text, after the title “Heart”.

²⁶ For recent discussion of the changing conceptions of motherhood, see, for example, E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), and Paula Morantz Cohen, *The Daughter’s Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991).

²⁷ Maria Edgeworth and Robert L. Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (London, 1801) viii; as quoted in Armstrong, “Politics” 70. Ellis makes use of Edgeworth’s writings elsewhere in her own work. For example, in *Mothers* 281-282, she cites “a short, but appropriate passage from Miss Edgeworth” on the “appropriate position of woman” and the necessity to educate her for that position. This appropriation already points to the ideas Ellis elaborates on at more length in *Heart*.

the opposition of education of the head and of the heart, and argues that both are necessary to produce a complete human being:

My direct purpose is to show that in order to education being made what it ought to be - a preparation for life, we have not only to cultivate the understanding and store it with knowledge, as we do now, but so to improve the whole range of human feeling, motive, and conception, in fact so to raise the entire character as that life itself shall be exalted, and made purer and happier. (*Heart*, 53)

The two types of education are, however, gendered. The kind of education most appropriate for women is that of the heart. In her response to the call for higher education for women, or education equal to that of men, Ellis replies that women are different and therefore deserve a different education from that of men. "After all", she asks,

for what are women intended, and for what ought they to be prepared? Men have their appropriate place in creation, and women have theirs. It is absurd to compare them as being superior or inferior on either side; or to say that in one there is more mental capacity required than in the other. But it must still be of a different order, and directed to different purposes, otherwise the whole structure, the harmonious working, the happiness, and the beauty of our social constitution would be destroyed. (*Heart*, 17)

In many ways she is dismissive of "masculine" education, seeing it of lesser importance than a "woman's mission". The public sphere of men is not a successful arena "to improve the world", for men are "chiefly employed in restraining and preventing the outward manifestations of criminal desire" (*Heart*, 60). People advocate extending education, of the intellectual kind, not only to women but also to the working classes, but the true reform of society, she argues, would not come from more arithmetic and learning to write. In Ellis's text there is a slippage between the criminal and the working class, merely by constant juxtaposition, the discussion of one leading into the discussion of the

other. An ever present anxiety in *Education of the Heart* is her concern about the rising crime rate, in burglaries and especially in white collar crime such as fraud and embezzlement, and the ineffectual means of dealing with this by the public sphere. If the body is a text to be read, how can one trust its surfaces when the apparently “normal” banker or businessman is a thief? Ellis’s remedy to allay such social dis-ease, which had already spread to threaten the safety of the middle classes from within their own ranks, is to trace the illness back to its source and treat the immediate and earliest causes, by curative moral education both in the home and the school. True reform, therefore, has to be personal, through the education of the heart so that each individual will be motivated and disciplined by his own sound moral judgement, “uprightness”, “sincerity”, “good-will”, “integrity” and “truth” (*Heart*, 60). The educators for true education have to be women, for “the true adaptation to the work to be done must come from the woman’s own heart, from her warm sympathies and kindly affections, and from her clear perceptions and earnest love of what is right” (*Heart*, 58), those virtues which are natural in woman:

We see that life has to be prepared for, not by a system of acquiring knowledge alone, but by the discipline, culture, and training of the desires and affections of the heart; and here, also, the mother has advantages, natural and derived from circumstance, such as no one else can enjoy. (*Heart*, 65)

And while Ellis does not say outright that she believes that education of the heart is superior to that of the head, the implications are there in her text. By providing a series of comparisons she establishes the criteria for judging between the two. She acknowledges that the question arises “as to which is the more important, or whether one is not equally so with the other”. She believes that “the right culture and full development of both” are essential, for “out of the head springs capability, out of the heart motive”. Where intellectual education supplies “the means of acting”, moral education provides “the desire to act, and

the choice of which way action shall tend" (*Heart*, 112). Therefore, whereas with the former one aims for "cleverness", with the latter one achieves "goodness or rightness". The weighting of the choice of these oppositions is brought down heavily on the side of moral education in the final sentence of this paragraph in the text:

The one, if neglected, leaves only a blank - a state of ignorance, of not knowing what ought to be known; the other, if neglected, leaves the field of action open to passion and inclination, and the whole character becomes a ruin. (*Heart*, 113)

Further, Ellis's argument that education of the heart is most often overlooked allows her to give it textual importance by making it the subject of her book.

While Ellis's construction of women as different and not in need of the same education as men can be read as restrictive of women, as in fact it was, at the same time it can be seen as a way in which, as in her earlier works, she carved out a space for women to speak and to work - so long as it was work she felt appropriate to women. In the gendering of the body of education, she allots women their space of the heart, and constitutes it as central, essential, and of greatest importance in the development of any human being. She utilizes metaphors of the heart to support her and prioritize women's work. "Critics and burlesque makers" might ridicule "this tendency of women to throw their hearts into what they do", but enthusiasm, although sometimes misguided, is "a thousand times better", than "the heart be wanting in her work, and especially that best work which has been committed to her as the early teacher and trainer of youth" (*Heart*, 29). Work, where the heart is engaged, is true work, not just a duty, and "the true discipline of the heart can never be effected by the education of the head" (*Heart*, 30).

The person of paramount importance in the education of the heart, that is the training of character and moral development, is the mother. In this particular text Ellis constitutes the mother both as author and authority, for she possesses the advantage

of first laying her hands upon the plastic material which has to be moulded into character, and of laying them tenderly and lovingly, as no other hands, in all probability, will ever be laid in the whole course even of the longest life. The page on which the mother writes is a virgin page: it will never be so again. What then does she write there, so that her child in its after career may sometimes pause to read again, and still find those words, which no other writing has been deep enough to efface? (*Heart*, 88).²⁸

But in comparison with Ellis's earlier works, although the mother figures largely in *Education of the Heart*, by the time Ellis wrote this book she had to take into account that "large overplus of women" (*Heart*, 13) who might not marry and have children, many of whom had to work for their living. This created a difficulty for the middle-class woman, for unless she worked from "motives of charity or zeal", she would forego her social position:

²⁸ Such an argument would appear to place upon the mother the burden of responsibility and subsequent blame if the child "strayed" in adult life. Ellis, aware of this problem, seeks to redress the possible culpability by once again turning to "the usages of society": "To the mother we must go back, not as really the more responsible agent, [where schools have failed "to effect at sixteen what should have been done at six"] but as the only one whom the usages of society appear to have left at liberty for the discharge of the full amount of parental duty" (*Heart*, 115). Ellis does not perceive the father to be as useful since he is seldom around when the child needs to learn. However, a further corollary might be the mother becoming, in psychoanalytic terms, "the phallic mother", an overbearing, desired yet feared mother figure, as a result of Ellis's construction of all powerful motherhood, an issue I have unfortunately no time to deal with here. For further discussion of this form of the maternal see Shuttleworth, "Demonic mothers" 37, and Kaplan 45-47. Kaplan would argue that "the powerful ideology of the masochistic, angelic, all-sacrificing mother, produced through psychoanalytic theories as representing the healthy "feminine" woman, has functioned (and is *still* functioning, although in ways strikingly altered via new technologies) to construct women in ways that serve forces that have nothing per se to do with women" (45, emphasis in original). She sees such an ideological construct as the manipulation of women in, or out of the work force, to serve capitalism's needs. This argument does not negate my reading of Ellis as both complicit with and unquestioning of middle-class patriarchal ideology in her class assumptions while appropriating the ideology of gender to empower women.

But as soon as a woman begins to receive money, however great her need, or however glorious the escape from degrading dependence which she thus attains, so soon as she makes money by her own efforts, and lays by a little store acquired by the work of her own hands, the heroine is transformed into a tradeswoman, and she must find her place in society as such. (*Heart*, 14).

Ellis believes that "all this society is responsible for, and society must alter, before well-educated women can *comfortably* maintain themselves" (*Heart*, 15, emphasis in original). Behind the figure of the working woman lurked always the unmentionable figure of the prostitute, and we must note that Ellis reduces her working woman merely to the status of "tradeswoman" while elevating her at the same time to the stature of a heroine. But the rhetorical move necessitated by this shift in historical circumstances is significant. Whereas in her earlier works Ellis extols the need for women to be useful, by the time she wrote *Education of the Heart*, this "usefulness" has been transformed into "work".²⁹ And whereas "usefulness" borrows the language of the public sphere to give it authority, the working woman enters the public sphere linguistically and physically.

Although for most of the book Ellis emphasizes woman's role in education, especially as a mother, in the early chapters while she is establishing her case it is work in general that she is authorizing. Moreover, as with "usefulness", the idea of work is constructed in terms of health and strength as opposed to illness and weakness. Ellis claims that "women are never quite happy without work", and although work might be necessary because of hardship, "honest, reasonable,

²⁹ The idea of "work" as opposed to "usefulness" is not absent from Ellis's earlier writing, but has not the same urgency about it, nor is the range of work available as great. Nevertheless, work is even then constructed in terms of health. She describes the family engaged in business and asks why daughters should hold themselves "so immeasurably above all contact with it", for it cannot be "from want of capacity" or "from want of health, or, if it be, this very occupation would be to them the very best medicine". The problem to be faced is "degradation" - "if only it could be rendered less agonizing to the nerves of a young lady to 'go out' " (*Mothers*, 357, emphasis in original).

straightforward work, when not carried to excess - produces more healthiness of body, and cheerfulness of mind, than would be experienced by the same individuals in a condition of inactivity and self-indulgence" (*Heart*, 38). Even the middle-class woman who did not have to make a living would benefit from work:

There is perhaps no more striking feature by which modern society is characterized than the willingness, nay, the actual desire, evinced by women to take part in benevolent or animating occupation. Something to do, something to feel, something to live for, would seem to be the cry of every female heart, heard more and more distinctly every day, as if the fact were becoming more palpable, that the very nature of women deteriorates in a condition of inaction. (*Heart*, 40)

Women of the privileged classes working, voluntarily, in hospitals, prisons, "some even in the dens of infamy and crime" are not "mere enthusiasts", for "in associating with women thus engaged, nothing is more striking than their happiness, their real enjoyment of life, and delight in their work" (*Heart*, 41). Although Ellis disclaims that this is "the highest walk of life" (*Heart*, 42), she claims that satisfying work allows women to overcome "the little vexations and crosses of woman's ordinary existence" (*Heart*, 41).

The importance of the early chapters of *Education of the Heart* is, therefore, that although the later chapters might be interpreted as being restrictive of women's power to work, disallowing the importance of an equal education with men, or a greater role in the public sphere, Ellis has already established a legitimacy for women's work. She mentions more, in these early chapters, than the work of the mother. She acknowledges that women have to work for their living as well as becoming involved in voluntary and charity work. She expresses society's need to overcome the stigma attached to a woman working for her living. In her construction of womanhood she includes the unmarried as

well as the married woman, and creates a space where it is "healthy" for women to be working.

In both her early and later work, Ellis perceived the domestic sphere as being "central, and consequently small" (*Women*, 54), but the ripples that could spread from that centre were far reaching. With a female sovereign, the whole of Britain became a domestic hearth, and like the queen, the women of England had a duty "not only to the members of their own households, but to the community at large" (*Women*, 60). Sarah Ellis provided an alternative to the spatial arrangement of the body personal and politic. She redrew the topography of the separate spheres, relocating the woman not in a separate, parallel yet marginalized domestic realm but at the centre of concentric circles, reaching out from the private to the public arena. Although, for Ellis, men had a greater freedom in terms of physical action and location, at times of crisis (doubt or temptation or courage) they carried the image of "mother" as the voice of moral conscience. They would hear not the word of the father, but the mother speaking the words of the Father. She might be the Ventriloquist's dummy, but it was the figure of a woman, nonetheless, who spoke for God at the centre of Ellis's universe.

Inverting the margins, Ellis still perceived the domestic sphere as separate, but central, with woman at the heart and essential to the workings of a gendered "body". To read Ellis's work, therefore, is to encounter another construction of women, marginalized only in terms of physical space, confined in their own domestic realm, but central in terms of moral geography. As Elizabeth Langland argues, to read such texts "counters the view of women as victims passively suffering under patriarchal social structures [and] equally subverts the idea that [women] were heroines supporting unproblematic values in dealing with issues

of gender and class".³⁰ This is not to say that women were not socially, economically and politically subordinated and marginalized, but to take into account the way in which some women participated in the production of knowledge and in discursive practices which granted certain classes power, and helped enforce and extend middle-class hegemony. Ellis, while complicit in the power systems which oppressed her, wrote to ensure that (the middle-class) woman, although perceived to be weak, always the subject of her debilitating femininity, could not be ignored. Her health and strength were of vital importance to the moral, and therefore the social, political and economic, well-being of the nation.

Afterword: The Sickroom, throne of femininity.

Florence Nightingale's emphasis on domestic management, in her writing on nursing, makes clear, according to Mary Poovey, that

the militant strain implicit in the domestic ideology derived its authority from the morality that maternal instinct was assumed to bestow on all women: because it represented all women as middle class and invested them with commensurate moral power, the domestic ideology elevated every woman over every man.³¹

The sickroom, that scene of domestic drama, was a site, in the private sphere, of the ideological conflict that Poovey traces in the public sphere in her discussion of the establishment of nursing in England after Nightingale's success in the Crimea. All the differing strands of the association of femininity with illness are brought together in the sickroom. The oppositions implicit in the scene are not only illness and health, but weakness and power. But according to the sex of the patient, there is an uneasy shifting of gender positions. As Poovey points out,

³⁰ Langland 291.

³¹ Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 187.

the effect of the representation, in Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, of the patient as "a silent, immobile man" is both to reduce the stature of the man and to enhance the health, prestige and power of the woman in charge.³² The patient, I would argue, whether a man or a woman, is effectively feminized.³³ On the other hand, the ministering angel, the woman as nurse, despite her position of command, cannot be perceived as masculine. These elements must be safely repressed in favour of the "natural" feminine virtues of the domestic woman - self-sacrifice, empathetic caring, or silent solicitude. Such a necessity is implied in Sarah Ellis's assertion that,

taking into consideration the various excellencies and peculiarities of woman, I am inclined to think that the sphere which of all others admits of the highest developement [*sic*] of her character, is the chamber of sickness. (*Women*, 76)

Because the sickroom is the site of femininity, constructed in terms of both weakness and strength, the masculine is marginalized or even excluded. Poovey, in her analysis of *Notes on Nursing*, finds that the figure of the doctor is dwarfed or simply redundant in Nightingale's representation of domestic authority.³⁴ Ellis does not challenge the authority of the doctor, but strategically diminishes his importance by prioritizing the care of the patient's psychological well-being over that of his body, and the care of the mind is pre-eminently achieved through the empathetic understanding of the domestic woman. Ellis claims that she is "far from wishing [women] to interfere with the province of the physician" for they should aspire only to "the office of a judicious nurse" (*Women*, 77). Attendance upon the sick is "one of the most sacred of the duties devolving upon the class of women here described" (*Women*, 157), but although "the females of the family" (*Women*, 158) might "smooth the pillow" or

³² Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 187.

³³ See below, Chapter 12 for my discussion of the feminizing of men through illness.

³⁴ Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 187.

“administer the cordial draught”, so too could a hired nurse. More importantly “these are services rendered only to the suffering body” (*Women*, 157). The true nurse, in her natural femininity, is able, according to Ellis’s construction, to read the body of the patient for signs to guide her own behaviour: “the faintest shadow cannot pass across the aching brow, nor the slightest indication of a smile across the lips, but it serves as an index for her either to change the subject of her discourse, to be silent, or to proceed” (*Women*, 159). Besides being sympathetic, adaptable, affectionate or pleasing, she also has to be surveillant, even, at times, ready to receive confessions of a troubled mind so that the patient is “neither pained nor humbled” (*Women*, 160). The woman in the sickroom controls the discourse of the sickroom.

Isabella Beeton, in her instructions on the management of the sickroom, also stresses the need for a similar mixture of moral virtues and managerial behaviour. Beeton was heavily reliant on Nightingale’s *Notes on Nursing*, which she cites extensively. She advises that

all women are likely, at some period of their lives, to be called on to perform the duties of a sick-nurse, and should prepare themselves as much as possible, by observation and reading, for the occasion when they may be required to perform the office. The main requirements are good temper, compassion for the suffering, sympathy with sufferers, which most women worthy of the name possess, neat-handedness, quiet manners, love of order, and cleanliness.³⁵

Whereas Ellis implies that “the middle classes in England” are, “more frequently and more happily” (*Women*, 157), no longer employing nurses and domestics for economic reasons, Beeton interprets the choice not to hire a nurse in moral terms. Women who undertake nursing as an expression of their femininity gain

³⁵ Beeton 1017.

her approval, for “in some families, and those not a few let us hope”, the hiring of a nurse would be perceived as “a failure of duty” by the ladies.³⁶ Nevertheless, in her advice on the choice of a hired nurse, the play of class differences is complicated. Nurses from lower classes, associated with transgressive morality, sexuality, and intemperate habits, are suspect. In the constitution of working-class women as other, they are not perceived to possess the innate sensibilities of the truly feminine middle-class women. Therefore the woman who takes Beeton’s advice would choose a nurse as similar to the middle-class woman as possible, but robust and vigorous at the same time. She has to look for a nurse with a “good temper united to a kind and gentle disposition” and “a natural love of children”, one who would be “scrupulously clean and tidy in her person; honest, sober, and noiseless in her movements”, but also possessing “a strong nerve in case of emergencies”.³⁷ The working nurse is thus both excessively more than feminine and lacking in true feminine sensibility. In the catalogue of characteristics of the good nurse, the middle-class woman herself has to provide the “higher” virtues.

The sickroom, in Ellis’s representation, could also become a schoolroom, where other members of the family learn the lessons of caring and sharing, “by making it a favour and a privilege to wait upon the sick or helpless one” (*Mothers*, 145). Illness, therefore, through suffering or merely the sight of suffering, could bring the moral enlightenment which Ellis perceives as truly womanly, to men and women alike. The physical body, in its diseased state, is to be subsumed, replaced by abstract qualities and emotions, as the domestic woman herself embodies moral virtues. “How much better it would be”, Ellis propounds,

³⁶ Beeton 1017.

³⁷ Beeton 1019-20.

to make the season of sickness a time for drawing the bonds of family affection closer, for directing every thought and every expression of kindness with twofold tenderness to the alleviation of suffering - and if not of bodily suffering, to that of the mind, so as to convince the invalid that illness is scarcely an affliction when it is the means of calling forth so vast an amount of sympathy and love. (*Mothers*, 146)

Selflessness is to be expected of patient and family alike and is constituted by Ellis in feminine terms. From "the watchful eye of a mother ever near, the kind voices of gentle sisters speaking softly by the bed of pain, the sweet flowers gathered by a brother's hand and brought up fresh with dew, the fond enquiries of an anxious father arriving earlier than his wont" the invalid would learn that the time of illness could be "one of real enjoyment" and "instead ... of feeling withered up into a concentration of self, the heart ... expands and warms into new life" (*Mothers*, 147). In Ellis's gendered representation of the body, the heart is always feminine.

Nevertheless, as Shuttleworth has described of the representation of motherhood, so in the sickroom an excess of femininity is also a danger. Ellis questions the construct of femininity in terms of both self-sacrifice and infantilization. Her concern is that self-sacrifice, on the part of the woman, should not be taken too far, through "a kind of romantic devotion to the duties of the sick-room" (*Wives*, 252). By overextending herself, through the mistaken idea "that such romantic self-devotion is the extreme of generosity" (*Wives*, 253), a woman could neglect her own health, and such "an excessive and imprudent self-devotion ... effectually defeats its own object" (*Wives*, 254). On the other hand, "a weak and childish dependence" on the part of a woman, is "nothing better than a sort of disguised selfishness" (*Wives*, 254), a "childish fondness" which renders her useless if all she could do is "sit and faint beside [her husband]

in his illness" rather than "put aside all her own little ailments for the more important considerations" of his well-being (*Wives*, 255). The truly feminine woman, therefore, is strong. She knows the virtue of self-regulation, and in her panoptical position at the centre of the household, can survey and read the bodies of those under her management:

In accordance with deeper and more chastened feelings of regard, is that system of careful but quiet watchfulness over the general health of a husband, or a family, which detects every symptom of indisposition, and provides against all unnecessary aggravation of such symptoms by any arrangement of domestic affairs which can be made so as to spare an invalid, or prevent the occurrence of illness. (*Wives*, 254)

The sickroom was the innermost sanctum of femininity, a femininity epitomized by its contradictory associations of weakness and strength, helplessness and power, illness and health.

Part II:

**The Heroine in Decline:
Illness in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell**

Chapter 4

Illness in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell: Introduction

And even if she could have gone to him, I believe she would not. ... She longed to do all herself; to be his liberator, his deliverer; to win him life, though she might never regain his lost love, by her own exertions.

Mary Barton

But she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she had tried to settle that most difficult problem for woman, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set aside for freedom in working.

North and South

He loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well.

Wives and Daughters

In her novels Elizabeth Gaskell engaged in and with the wider discourses on women's sexuality. She too deployed the metaphor of illness as it relates to the construction of woman's sexuality, and of the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice, but not in the way it was used by the male writers of medical texts, or texts on prostitution. Like Sarah Ellis, she was a woman writer, but unlike Ellis's guarded avowal of a readership of women, Gaskell's range was more wide-reaching. As Mary Poovey writes

... literature was the nineteenth-century discourse in which women participated in the greatest numbers and arguably with the least cultural restraint; ... literature - and the novel in particular - was a forum in which women's sexual transgressions continued to be represented even after the mid-Victorian moralization of woman was under way ...¹

¹ Mary Poovey, "Speaking of the Body" 39.

Gaskell makes use, in her novels, of the actual suffering of illness by her heroines, not only as a device to express psychological strain and emotional turmoil, but also as a metaphorical process of rebirth and reintegration, as the young women come to terms with their sexuality and the demands of the feminine ideal. Thus Gaskell questions and reinterprets that ideal, not so much to overturn it, but to reconstruct it in a way that gives her fictional women a chance to define themselves, not only as "relative creatures" in their roles as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers, but also in relation to their "self", that sense of autonomy as an individual, as a physical and emotional entity.²

For Gaskell one key area of exploration is the way in which women express their sexuality in a society where the dominant ideology constructs this in terms of desire for maternity, and of self-sacrifice, and silences physical passion. Her heroines face the problem of how to articulate their bodies, their desires, when there are no words, and they are effectively silenced. For Gaskell does not construct women's sexuality wholly in terms of the dominant ideology. Although she accepts the desire for motherhood as an important part of a woman's life, in her novels she shows that women's sexuality also encompasses physical desire, the expression of love. And here she is faced with the same problem as her heroines - how can she write of such desires, if the language of those desires is suppressed, unprintable, unacceptable in relation to women? As Margaret Homans writes, in a different context, "symbolic writing was inappropriate for women, and yet writing in any other way would have been even more inappropriate, as it would have been to articulate what their culture required to be left silent".³ Gaskell's method of exploring such an issue is to take

² I borrow the phrase from Françoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel, 1837-1867*, trans. Anthony Rudolph (London: Allen Lane, 1974). However, Sarah Ellis used it also when she wrote that women were "in fact, from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world, strictly speaking, relative creatures", *Women of England* 155.

³ Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 12. Homans argues that men's and women's entry

the metaphor of illness as it relates to women's sexuality and literalize it. This is a two way process in which the real illness of her heroine can stand as a metaphor for her silenced sexuality, and the metaphor of self-sacrifice is taken literally - the heroine is ill because she has been killing off her "self".

Homans describes the literal as "some original ground of meaning [which] is the necessary illusion that empowers the acts of figuration that constitute literature". Thus, although the literal meaning could "hypothetically destroy any text it actually entered by making superfluous those very figures" which represent it, this possibility is avoided because it is "always, but never more than, a threat, since literal meaning cannot be present in a text: it is always elsewhere".⁴ In a feminist rereading of Lacan, following the work of Nancy Chodorow, Homans posits that woman's relationship to the literal is always problematic because of her place as object in the symbolic order, the realm of the Father and of language:

A dualism of presence and absence, of subject and object, structures everything our culture considers thinkable; yet woman cannot participate in it as subjects as easily as can men because of the powerful, persuasive way in which the feminine [which Homans sees as linked, epistemologically, with the literal] is again and again said to be on the object's side of that dyad. Women who do conceive of themselves as subjects - that is, as present, thinking women rather than as "woman" - must continually guard against

into the symbolic order is different because of their differing relationship with the mother, and that rather than suffering a loss (the symbolic order depending on the absence of the mother) the daughter "does not enter the symbolic order as wholeheartedly or exclusively as does the son", 12. Homans maintains therefore that the daughter "speaks two languages at once. Along with symbolic language [based on figuration], she retains the literal or presymbolic language that the son represses at the time of his renunciation of his mother", 13. Homans differentiates this "mother-daughter language" from Julia Kristeva's "semiotic", because, although it is continuous from childhood, it is, unlike the semiotic, "neither repressed nor capable of a dangerous return" but "socially and culturally suppressed and silenced" by the privileging in Western culture of the symbolic and the figurative, 19. She traces signs of "mother-daughter language" in writers such as Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Gaskell.

⁴ Homans 4.

fulfilling those imposed definitions by being returned to the position of object.⁵

Although I am uneasy about an all too readily accepted equation between "the feminine" and "women", and "women" and "the literal", Homans' argument has relevance to my reading of Gaskell.⁶ In her association of the literal with the feminine, Homans establishes an opposition which links the figurative with the masculine. She points out that within western culture, the figurative is privileged, that "to take something literally is to get it wrong".⁷ Yet it seems to me that this is precisely the method Gaskell uses in her exploitation of the figurative idea of "self-sacrifice". One of the four recurrent literary situations or practices which Homans designates as instances of "bearing the word", as she terms this special relationship of women to language, is to be seen in "moments at which a figure is literalized".⁸ By this she means those occasions in a text when "some piece of overtly figurative language, a simile or extended or conspicuous metaphor, is translated into an actual event or circumstance".⁹ Homans herself notes examples of Gaskell using "the literal", and pinpoints especially moments in Gaskell's letters and early writing. However I will concentrate on the specific instances of illness in the novels.

The issue of "self", the process of shaping a woman's subjectivity, is a constant theme in Gaskell's novels. Identifying the theme in a diary Gaskell kept

⁵ Homans 4-5.

⁶ Homans addresses this dilemma herself, when she writes "I am aware that I am myself taking this myth [Freud's and Lacan's use of the Oedipus story] literally, in connecting those psychoanalytic or linguistic positions, "masculine" and "feminine," with the experiences of real women who wrote. But "taking it literally" is what these writers have learned women might happily do, or are supposed to do, and it is only by our taking literally the myth of women's literality that we can find out what is at stake in the very process of taking it literally", 6.

⁷ Homans 5.

⁸ Homans 29.

⁹ Homans 30.

during her eldest daughter's childhood, before she began writing fiction, Homans comments:

One of the major themes both in Gaskell's account of forming Marianne's character and in the identification between them is that of "wilfullness," or the opposition between feminine selflessness and an inappropriate selfishness. The issue translates into the terms of character the opposition between passive, womanly transmission and original symbolic creation.¹⁰

The young women in Gaskell's novels and stories constantly strive to find a balance within this opposition of selflessness and selfishness promulgated in an ideology which lauds the former and denigrates the latter. Her heroines struggle to find a place from which they can articulate their "selves", and speak through a language which would keep them silent, that is, to constitute themselves as subjects in a culture that regards them as objects.¹¹

One question to be raised here is how to deal with the twentieth century notion of the decentred self in works of an era that believed so wholeheartedly in the integrity, the unity and the uniformity of the self. Nina Auerbach describes the era as an age where "from the 1820s on, reflexive locutions like 'self-culture,' 'self-help,' and 'self-development' cheered Victorian men on the path to success".¹² She posits that the Victorians, in response, turned to fiction: "Its

¹⁰ Homans 170. Homans discusses this issue as it arises in Gaskell's letters, as well as "Gaskell's rhetoric about Charlotte Brontë in her 1857 biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in which she sets the selfishness of a writer's imagination against the selflessness of realism", 173.

¹¹ There is an interesting connection made between this struggle and illness in Gaskell's letters. She writes to Eliza Fox: "Yes that discovery of one's exact work in the world is the puzzle: I never meant to say it was not. I long (weakly) for the old times where right and wrong did not seem such complicated matters; and I am sometimes coward enough to wish we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women. Only even then I don't believe William would ever have *commanded* me. I can understand your nervous headache so well, having just worried myself into a similar one". J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard eds., *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1966) 109, emphasis in original.

¹² Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of Victorians* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1990) 60.

province was lives; its material was those points in the life cycle where the self grows into its identity, shaping potentially dangerous volatility into uniform integrity".¹³ Through the metaphor of theatricality, Auerbach discusses the way in which there is evidence of multiplicity in these texts, those occasions where a character abounds rather than solidifies, those moments of potential for another line of development, other roles to be played. Such multiplicity is evident in Gaskell's novels. Through the use of oppositions and contrasts, working and middle class, the fallen and the good woman, active and passive femininity, public and private spheres, masculine and feminine roles, Gaskell explores the possibilities of her heroines' emergent "selves" and how these might be constructed within the dominant ideology. Of herself, she wrote to her friend Eliza Fox:

thats the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my "Mes," for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian - (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William most especially who are in full extasy. Now that's my "social" self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's Wm who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, And so it is - only that does not quite do.¹⁴

One means Gaskell used to explore the dilemma of divergent "selves" was through the figurativeness and literality of illness. The unnamed illness that could be termed the "decline" is, in her novels, part of a process of finding "self-hood", the integration of the disparate parts of being and the many selves that a woman has to be. Auerbach describes illness, although a confining role for

¹³ Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 17.

¹⁴ *Letters* 108, emphasis and spelling as in original.

women, as acquiring “the dynamism of theatre” through “women’s crises and conversions”:

Women might be barred from heroics, relegated to the privacy of illness and solitary visions, but nineteenth-century theatricality energized those illnesses and visions with transforming glory.¹⁵

Auerbach is one of the few commentators to discuss illness as a process in nineteenth-century novels. Although Gaskell’s use of illness has been noticed in different critical analyses of her works, it is usually noticed only to be dismissed as a weak plot contrivance, or a lapse into conventionality, without any further investigation into the illness as a process of development. Pauline Nestor writes, for example, of Phillis’s illness in *Cousin Phillis*, “it is not surprising that Phillis Holman breaks down under the pressure of her emotional turmoil and guilt”. However, she continues:

more generally, such breakdown is a common occurrence in Gaskell’s fiction. Although the device is too frequently used, in some cases it does provide the logical end to a sequence of stress and pain in which the sufferer is necessarily passive, allowing for the ultimate withdrawal into complete passivity.¹⁶

Similarly, Patsy Stoneman, in her otherwise perceptive analysis of Gaskell’s novels, describes how Margaret Hale’s illness after her lie to Thornton and her father’s death “has reduced Margaret from a fearless girl ‘with boundless step’ and ‘straightforward look’ to something like a conventional Victorian lady”.¹⁷ Molly’s illness in *Wives and Daughters* is dismissed by Laurence Lerner as “one of those low-spirited declines into which Victorian heroines drop at low

¹⁵ Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals*, 81, 83.

¹⁶ Pauline Nestor, *Female Friendships and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 64.

¹⁷ Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) 130.

moments of the plot".¹⁸ Gaskell may be using a convention but she appropriates it for her own purposes and transforms it into an expression of the dangers inherent in an ideology which silences and confines women.

The implications of illness

Throughout my discussion of Gaskell's novels, I use the word "decline" to describe her heroines' illness. Their illness is a process, rather than a permanent state, one from which they recover, rather than become an invalid, or permanently invalidated. I make a distinction between invalidism and the decline. Invalidism seems to work in the way that, traditionally, feminist historians have analysed women's illness in the nineteenth century, as an inverted source of power.¹⁹ The woman gains a negative strength, by becoming the focus of attention within the family. Invalids of this kind, such as Ruth's mother in *Ruth*, or Mrs Hamley in *Wives and Daughters*, are often "invalid" to undertake all "natural" and "normal" functions of womanhood, but are, at the same time, a centre around which the household revolves. In *North and South*, Mrs Shaw and Edith partially fill this category, but rather than showing "selflessness", in fact use ill health to get their own selfish way. Mrs Shaw is constantly worried about her health "as a source of apprehension". She fosters "a nervous little cough whenever she thought about it", and through it achieves her goal, for "some complaisant doctor ordered her just what she desired - a winter in Italy". Gaskell comments ironically on her use of "passive" power:

Mrs Shaw had as strong wishes as most people, but she never liked to do anything from the open and acknowledged motive of her own

¹⁸ Laurence Lerner, introduction, *Wives and Daughters*, by Elizabeth Gaskell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 8.

¹⁹ For example, Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman", and Ehrenreich and English, *Complaints and Disorders* and *For Her Own Good*. Further discussion of "the invalid", in the works of Charlotte Yonge, will be found in Chapter 12.

good will and pleasure; she preferred being compelled to gratify herself by some other person's command or desire. She really did persuade herself that she was submitting to some hard external necessity; and thus she was able to moan and complain in her soft manner, all the time she was in reality doing just what she liked.
(9)

Edith, too, promises to follow her mother's example. Margaret tends her "when no gaiety was in prospect, and she was consequently rather inclined to fancy herself ill" (362). She uses her weak femininity as a manipulative weapon. When Margaret opposes Edith's views, Edith cries like a spoilt child, Margaret gives in and "ended by being Edith's slave for the rest of the day; while that little lady, overcome by wounded feeling, lay like a victim on the sofa, heaving occasionally a profound sigh, till at last she fell asleep".²⁰ Such whims and imaginary complaints, the negative side of femininity, contrast greatly in *North and South* with the real suffering of Mrs Hale, who has not had the wealth and leisure to foster illness as a way of life.²¹ Even so she is initially seen by Mrs Thornton as "a bit of a fine lady with her invalidism". Weak feminine Fanny, too, is "seldom without an ailment", which she uses to avoid doing things she does not wish to do.²² Thus invalidism can be tied to expectations of class and feminine behaviour.

²⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* 398. It is important to note here that Gaskell makes a sharp distinction between this kind of "illness" and childbirth which she does not depict as an illness, and although using the word "confinement" (*North and South*, 361), which implies restrictions, imprisonment in the body, she still is more direct, outspoken, and matter-of-fact on this issue than many other contemporary authors, such as Charlotte Yonge, who often use the general term "illness".

²¹ Mrs Hale's illness is never named, and although the women of the family, Mrs Hale, Dixon, and Margaret, know what it is, it is kept a secret from Mr Hale, until it can no longer be hidden from him. It is probably some form of cancer. The doctor states "we cannot touch the disease, with all our poor vaunted skill. We can only delay its progress - alleviate the pain it causes" (*North and South*, 162). I am indebted to Professor Dorothy Collin for the suggestion that the illness might be either uterine or breast cancer, hence the confining of the knowledge to the women of the family, and also the significance of this as a specifically female disease, connected with sexuality, reproduction and maternity.

²² *North and South* 136, 89.

I see the decline, on the other hand, as something different from the depiction of invalidism in the texts. Mary Barton, Ruth Denbigh, Margaret Hale, Phillis Holman and Molly Gibson do not gain power in this way from their illness. Because the process of decline is constructed in Gaskell's novels in terms of a woman's access to and exclusion from language, it is useful to follow Julia Kristeva's work on depression and melancholy, since she constructs these in similar terms.²³ Kristeva writes of depression as "an abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis[,] lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself".²⁴ She finds that "for those who are depressed, the Thing like the self is a downfall that carries them along into the invisible and unnameable. *Cadere*".²⁵ To "downfall" and "depression" I would add "decline", for all figure a movement downwards, away from the seemingly unified "self", into what Kristeva terms "nonintegration" and "disintegration", as "the very self ... literally 'falls into pieces'".²⁶ Thus Margaret Hale reaches the stage in her decline when

a sense of change, of *individual nothingness*, of perplexity and disappointment, overpowered Margaret. Nothing had been the same; and this slight, *all-pervading instability*, had given her greater pain than if all had been too entirely changed for her to recognize it.²⁷

Likewise, Molly Gibson felt

as if she could not understand it at all; but as for that matter, what did she understand? Nothing. For a few minutes her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being

²³ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

²⁴ Kristeva, *Black Sun* 3.

²⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun* 15, emphasis in original.

²⁶ Kristeva, *Black Sun* 18.

²⁷ *North and South* 389, emphases added.

carried on in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead.²⁸

While I do not mean to imply that it is necessary to give the illness suffered by Gaskell's heroines some clinical definition, nevertheless the process of that illness bears a remarkable resemblance to the idea of depression as described by Kristeva, if taken on a metaphorical level, especially as it relates to language, and the integration of identity. For Kristeva depression and melancholia are based upon "the same impossible mourning for the maternal object", the loss of the mother which is forever symbolized by access to language.²⁹ She writes, "for the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters".³⁰ Motherless Molly Gibson has lost, through his remarriage, the closeness to her father who was "her mother as well as her father" and she retreats into silence.³¹ Margaret Hale's state of "individual nothingness" is reached when, literally, she is mourning the loss of both her mother and her father, and metaphorically, she has lost her sense of self through constant self-abnegation and self-denial. In their illness, Gaskell's heroines experience what Kristeva calls "the spectacular collapse of meaning". For Kristeva, depressed persons "experience difficulty integrating the universal signifying sequence, that is, language". Rather than fitting into language where speech is a "second nature", such people find speech "like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue".³² Mary, Ruth, Margaret, Phillis and Molly at times cannot speak, or do so in a whisper, or in reply, or in another's words. To come out of their decline they must reassert their "selves" and re-insert themselves into language. Gaskell's heroines must

²⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 418.

²⁹ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 9.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 6.

³¹ *Wives and Daughters* 87.

³² Kristeva, *Black Sun* 53.

pass through this passage of wordlessness, the cultural silence of woman in the dominant ideology literalized as a state of illness, to re-enter the symbolic order, the arena of language, and a renewed articulation of self.

Another useful way of analysing the young women's illness is through the variant meanings of the word "decline" itself. Specifically the word was used in the nineteenth century to indicate "any disease in which bodily strength gradually fails; especially tubercular phthisis, consumption".³³ This particular meaning could apply to men and women alike. A more general meaning, not tied to health, is "the process of declining or sinking to a weaker or inferior condition; gradual loss of force, vigour, vitality, or excellence of quality; falling off, decay, diminution, deterioration". Nevertheless the underlying metaphor of this meaning implies a downward movement, a fall.

Of more interest and use, perhaps, are those meanings given for the verb "to decline". There is the verbal state for the noun "to fail in force, vigour, vitality etc", but even more application to the condition of Gaskell's heroines comes from other, now obsolete, meanings. The definition of "to decline" as "to turn aside from (anything) so as to avoid it" could be used to highlight the aspects of the decline, where the woman tries to repress knowledge of her sexuality and her desire. Another definition, "to lower, bring down, depress, bring low, degrade, abase" is appropriate when applied, for example, to Margaret Hale's decline since she feels "degraded", and "debased" by Thornton's knowledge of her telling a lie, and also the sexual reading of her behaviour.³⁴ Thus the coded language implying moral fall and prostitution is echoed in the idea of decline. Mary Barton, too, becomes ill after being put on public display at the time of Jem's trial.

³³ Definitions are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Vol. IV, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 339-341.

³⁴ *North and South* 273-4, 276.

A third meaning of "to decline" is the regular one of "not to consent or agree to doing, or to do (something suggested, asked etc)" or, synonymously, "to refuse". However, "to decline" does not carry the notion of active repulse or rejection conveyed by the latter word, and is therefore a milder and more courteous expression. In gender terms the milder and more courteous is the feminine way of doing things. Politeness masks the fact that this is a statement, albeit negative. So, we might ask, if a woman declines, what is she saying no to? Is it to be understood that men can say no, while women decline?

The idea that in order to come out of their decline Gaskell's heroines must go through a process of reintegration, needs examination too. Integration in modern psychology assumes a normative role, that the divided self can be made whole, brought together into one. When Margaret or Molly questions her own integrity she is questioning her sense of wholeness, and is forced to recognise her divided self, that all cannot be in her control, confined to the realm of authority, the symbolic order. She must learn to account for her unconscious desires as well in her own self-authoring. Initially she does not want to recognise this and so declines to, turns away, avoids her feelings, and becomes ill. In her situation as a woman, under the prevailing ideology based on oppositions, integration was not really possible, since the feminine was one extreme as the masculine was the other, that is, the norm was the extreme, non-integrated state. Her integration, then, is not so much conforming to a given norm, as the proposal of a new norm of behaviour. The sense of balance which she must achieve, of the masculine and feminine elements, or of her need for order, yet acceptance of her desires, is the construction of a new way; not a radical new way, since in fact the steps she takes are scarcely distinguishable as they are couched in the terms of the old order.

Gaskell never overturns the ideology of domestic womanhood, for she can never escape the boundaries of the ideological language which she critiques. Rather she refashions it in ways which are more openly, less rigidly, organizing the polarities of gender roles - masculine/feminine, public/private. In her first novel she is the most conservative. *Mary Barton* explores the possible roles for women within the restrictions of domestic ideology, but in the end Mary must be reconfined within the conventional social order and the bounds of femininity. Even so, Gaskell provides an alternative to the feminine "do-nothing lady". In *Ruth* Gaskell explores the positive and negative aspects of the sanctity of motherhood and the idea of maternal self-abnegation. The question in *North and South* concerns balance, as Gaskell breaks down rigid gender roles and, in Margaret Hale, validates the strong woman. In *Cousin Phillis*, the infantilizing of women through the denial of the expression of their sexuality becomes a destructive force. For Molly Gibson, in *Wives and Daughters*, strength is shown to be in personal integrity as she, too, finds a balance between selfless- and selfishness, and learns to be less of a daughter and more of a wife. Gaskell's work never steps outside of the ideology, but nevertheless, there is a development of ideas as she moves towards a moderation of and a mediation between the polarities which prescribed the roles of men and women in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus the dominant ideology of domestic womanhood is pointed out as lacking, but there is no reverse discourse here, only adaptation within, and modification of the discourses of domesticity and women's sexuality, which of course is part of the production of that ideology. Gaskell was subversive, but not a revolutionary.

Chapter 5

Mary Barton: rewriting the “do-nothing lady”

Oh! I do think that the necessity for exertion, for some kind of action (bodily or mental) in times of distress, is a most infinite blessing, although the first efforts at such seasons are painful. Something to be done implies that there is yet hope of some good thing to be accomplished, or some additional evil that may be avoided; and by degrees the hope absorbs much of the sorrow.

Mary Barton

“Dear Jem! I often could have told you more of love, if I had not spoken out so free. Remember that time, Jem, if ever you think me cold. Then, the love that’s in my heart would out in words; but now, though I’m silent on the pain I’m feeling in quitting you, the love is in my heart all the same. But this is not the time to speak on such things. If I do not do what I feel to be right now, I may blame myself all my life long!”

Mary Barton

“You’ve set up heroine on your own account, Mary Barton.”

Mary Barton

In the Preface to *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* Gaskell describes how she was prompted to write a work of fiction “from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to”.¹ Although she had written short stories before this, *Mary Barton* was her first novel, and the “circumstances” that prompted her were her grief and her state of emotional illness following the death from scarlet fever of her ten month old son in August 1845. As Winifred Gérin writes:

While she deplored the “evil of this bustling life”, that prevents the sufferer remaining undisturbed with his grief, what saved her at the time were the claims of her family. Though she said that “hardly anyone knows how it has changed me”, her husband for one knew her well enough to dread the effect of such deep depression. He made a practical, and quite surprising suggestion. He urged her to

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 37. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

write a book - a work of some length "to turn her thoughts from the subject of her grief".²

There seems to be a paradoxical claim in this passage, one that highlights the problems for women about which Gaskell wrote. On the one hand there is the selflessness of putting the demands of her family before her own grief. On the other is the advice of her husband to be self-centred, to concentrate on her own creative abilities, to overcome her grief. This is the very opposition that Margaret Homans has noted in Gaskell's diary and letters.³ The first point to be made about *Mary Barton*, therefore, is that it was written both out of grieving maternity and as an attempt to escape that feeling. Gaskell had moved from the role of the mother to the role of the writer, from the feminine domestic to the masculine public realm, from illness to health. An alternative purpose to motherhood in a woman's life was discovered in writing, as her "appointed work". As Gaskell herself wrote to Eliza Fox, two years after the publication of *Mary Barton*:

One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life. However we are talking of women. I am sure it is healthy for them to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; it keeps them from being morbid as you say; and takes them into the land where King Arthur lies hidden, and soothes them with its peace. I have felt this in writing, I see others feel it in music, you in painting, so assuredly a blending of the two is desirable. (Home duties and the development of the Individual I mean), which you will say it takes no Solomon to tell you but the difficulty is where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other. I have no doubt that the cultivation of each tends to the healthy state, - my grammar is all at sixes and sevens I

² Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 74.

³ Homans 170, 173.

have no doubt but never mind if you can pick out my meaning. I think a great deal of what you have said.⁴

The letter is continued after a two day break:

If the Self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy, there is no doubt of *that* - and that is part of the danger of cultivating the Individual Life; but I do believe we have all some appointed work to do, whh no one else can do so well; Wh. is *our* work; what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God; and that first we must find out what we are sent into the world to do, and define it and make it clear to ourselves, (that's *the* hard part) and then forget ourselves in our work, and our work in the End we ought to strive to bring about. I never can either talk or write clearly so I'll ee'n leave it alone.⁵

Gaskell's own confusion about this issue is reflected in the confused grammar and syntax of her letter, a confusion of which she was fully aware.⁶ The discovery of one's "appointed work" and the balance between "home duties" and "the development of the individual" faces each of her heroines in turn. It is in finding the balance that health is maintained. An imbalance on either side, therefore, living a wholly selfless or selfish life, is to be in a state of illness.

When turning to writing fiction, Gaskell noted in the Preface to *Mary Barton*, she first attempted a "tale" set in a rural scene, "the period of which was more than a century ago, and the place on the borders of Yorkshire" (37). The model for her writing, therefore, was the romance, in keeping with the idea expressed in her letter that "the hidden world of Art" was a refuge, "the land where King Arthur lies hidden". In *Mary Barton*, however, a novel which has been mined for the "realism" of its details of domestic scenes of working-class

⁴ *Letters* 106, emphasis in original. For the actual circumstances of the writing of this letter, see Brenda Colloms, "'Tottie' Fox, Her Life and Background", *The Gaskell Society Journal* 5 (1991): 21.

⁵ *Letters* 107, emphases and abbreviations in original.

⁶ Margaret Homans discusses the grammar and syntax of this letter in detail; Homans 174-5.

life, and condemned for its lapses into romance and melodrama, Gaskell explored different forms of romance, and their adequacies and inadequacies, as they construct a potential identity for Mary, as the heroine of her story. In the Preface she continued: "I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided" (37). Romance, as melodrama, in the conventional plot of the working girl seduced and the rivalry between the working-class hero and the upper class villain, is one of the structures underpinning the novel. Another is a more traditional form of romance, the quest story, where Mary takes on heroic qualities to rescue Jem. At the same time, we have the seemingly contradictory intention expressed by Gaskell to try "to write truthfully", to "represent" working-class life, and "give some utterance" to their agony.⁷

According to Nina Auerbach, one way the Victorians could explore the possibilities of the fluidity and mobility of the divided self was through dramatizing possible roles in fiction. Mary's possible lives, in the novel named for her, are dramatized in terms of class, gender, and literary form. To trace her different potential selves it is necessary to discuss her role in terms of the middle class, the working class, and types of romance, before considering her illness which re-establishes her in the social order, as a woman of "uniform integrity".⁸

⁷ Robyn R. Warhol discusses realism and the social-problem novel, and summarizes critical attitudes to Gaskell's "realism" and the intrusion of romance in *Mary Barton*, in *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers UP, 1989) 48 and 210, n. 2-4. For Warhol, Gaskell uses an "engaging narrator" to link the fictional world of the characters with the "real" world of the author and reader, to convey verisimilitude to her story, and to subvert any distancing effect an intrusive narrator might have.

⁸ Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 17.

Potential lives: fallen woman, working girl, or lady of leisure

Early in the novel Mary's father, John Barton, expresses his concern about Mary's future. He does not wish her to become "a do-nothing lady, worrying shopmen all morning and screeching at her pianny all afternoon, and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God's creatures but herself" (44). Barton, therefore, condemns the idleness, as he perceives it, of the middle-class woman. On the other hand, he does not wish Mary to be representative of her working-class background either: "he had never left off disliking a factory for a girl, on more accounts than one" (61). The reason that is suppressed here is the ready equation by the middle class of working-class women with sexual availability and prostitution.⁹ However Gaskell makes the same assumption part of Barton's reasoning too. He associates factory work with Esther's downfall:

"That's the worst of factory work, for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how. ... You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got home so late at night, that at last I told her my mind: ... Says I, "Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker." (43)

Later the link between Mary and Esther is made explicit. Barton "often looked at Mary, and wished she were not so like her aunt, for the very bodily likeness seemed to suggest a possibility of a similar likeness in their fate; and he became suspicious and anxious about Mary's conduct" (172). Barton sees marriage as the answer, as a way of keeping Mary under control, as well as keeping her sexuality

⁹ For a discussion of attitudes towards class, sex, and money, see, for example, Marcus 128ff, and Harrison 273.

confined. But throughout the novel Esther lurks as a shadow to Mary, the potential fate for the pretty working-class girl.¹⁰

Yet the class issue is not so straightforward as it might seem. As I have already argued concerning medical texts and the debate on prostitution, where women were concerned, the differences of class are not always as important as the similarities of gender. Gaskell stresses that, as a working-class girl, "Mary must do something", but there are really only three respectable openings for her: factory work, domestic service, or dressmaking. Thus she shows that the choices for working-class woman are, in their own way, as restricted as for the middle class, and that both classes of women are being structured by the middle-class ideal of domesticity. Marriage and maternity are the desired future, and the good wife and mother is praised. But, as in Acton's work, there are those women of the working class who seem to escape such hegemony. Gaskell, in her desire to express "the truth", must admit to the independence of the working-class woman, even as she wishes to curtail it. The independence of working-class women, represented by Sally Leadbitter, is usually negatively marked within the text (as exemplified by Sally's surname). Sally is a malicious gossip, willing to

¹⁰ Other examples of this "shadow", the ever present subtext of prostitution, are seen in the narrator's address to the reader after Barton leaves the Davenports' cellar: "But he could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by in the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under? You may be elbowed one instant by the girl desperate in her abandonment, laughing in mad merriment with her outward gesture, while her soul is longing for the rest of the dead, and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here" (101); in Bamford's poem, "God help the poor", where the first example is the fallen woman, "yon poor pale girl, who droops forlorn" (154); in the motto to Chapter 10: "Then guard and shield her innocence,/Let her not fall like me;/Twere better, Oh! a thousand times,/She in her grave should be" (157); in the motto to Chapter 14, about the fallen woman, as a blighted tree, from a poem called "Street Walks", "So, could we look into the human breast,/How oft the fatal blight that meets our view,/ Should we trace down to the torn, bleeding fibres/ Of a too trusting heart - where it were shame,/ For pitying tears, to give contempt or blame" (206, emphasis added); when Mrs Wilson accuses Mary of "profligacy" after Jem's arrest, and calls her "a whited sepulchre" (281), a term which not only suits the characterisation of Mrs Wilson and her knowledge of the Bible, but which was also used for the deceptive beauty of the prostitute (see Acton, *Prostitution* 30); and when Mary contemplates suicide alone on the dockside in Liverpool: "once or twice a spectral thought loomed among the shadows of her brain; a wonder whether beneath that cold dismal surface there would not be rest from troubles on earth" (361).

participate in Mary's seduction for the excitement afforded by the intrigue, but even then, Sally has the redeeming quality of the care she gives to her mother. The strongest condemnation of working wives, who do not conform to the domestic ideal, is undercut by being placed in the mouth of Mrs Wilson, and is tinged with comedy.¹¹ She tells Mary that:

"ay, nine men I know, as has been driven to th' public-house by having wives as worked in factories; good folk, too, as thought there was no harm in putting their little ones out at nurse, and letting their house go all dirty, and their fires all out; and that was a place as was tempting for a husband to stay in, was it? He soon finds out gin-shops, where all is clean and bright, and where the fire blazes cheerily and gives a man a welcome as it were." (165)

Alice supports her by saying that the Queen ought to be told, and Mrs Wilson continues:

"I say it's Prince Albert as ought to be asked how he'd like his missis to be from home when he comes in, tired and worn, and wanting some one to cheer him; and may be, her to come in by-and-by, just as tired and down in th' mouth; and how he'd like to keep a bright fire in his grate. Let alone his meals being all hugger-mugger, and comfortless. I'd be bound, prince as he is, if his missis served him so, he'd be off to a gin-palace, or summat o' that kind. So why can't he make a law again poor folks' wives working in factories? ... don't tell me it's not the Queen as makes laws; and isn't she bound to obey Prince Albert? And if he said they mustn't, why she'd say they mustn't, and then all folk would say, oh no, we never shall do any such thing no more." (165)

¹¹ I cannot agree with Aina Rubenius when she writes, referring to the same incident in the novel, that "direct quotations from the characters in her books must of course not always be supposed to express the author's own opinion, though it seems safe to do so in this instance". Although Rubenius does qualify her statement and also points out that Mrs Wilson is not a sympathetic character, she has a conservative reading of *Mary Barton*, in that she claims that in this novel Gaskell saw women "only as appendages to men, without any intrinsic value in themselves" because Gaskell considered only the effects that factory work for women had on the home, their husbands and children. Aina Rubenius, *The Woman Question in Mrs Gaskell's Life and Works* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1950) 147, 228, and 152.

The royal family are juxtaposed here with working men and women, demolishing the differences of class, and encompassing them all in one ideal: that of middle-class domesticity, centred on hearth and home. Michel Foucault claims that once the working class "no longer risked playing an assertive class role opposite the bourgeoisie, it would remain the instrument of the bourgeoisie's hegemony."¹² The discourse of the domestic ideal was part of what Foucault sees as the deployment of bourgeois sexuality, and Gaskell, in having Mrs Wilson and Alice express these views on working wives, constructs a working class that is enculturated with middle-class ideals. However, as Foucault argues, the working class were hesitant to accept this deployment, for the reason that "this sexuality was the business of the bourgeoisie and did not concern [them]".¹³ By distancing Mrs Wilson through the use of humour, Gaskell fractures the apparent unity of/unanimity on the domestic ideal/ideology and allows to escape those who do not conform to this cosy image.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it is the middle-class ideal of femininity which attracts Mary, as it had Esther before her, and this ideal is tinged with the colours of romance: she "dreamt of what was often in her waking thought; of the day when she should ride from church in her carriage, with wedding-bells ringing and take up her astonished father, and drive away from the old work-a-day court for ever, to live in a grand house" (120), and she:

¹² Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol. 1 126.

¹³ Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol. 1 127.

¹⁴ It is not only women who "escape" by not conforming to the domestic ideal. Gender roles in the working class are constructed by Gaskell as being less rigid than those of the middle class. In contrast with the Carsons, where Mr Carson needs rare leisure time to appreciate domestic life (and here the cosiness of the drawing room only), the working-class men are shown carrying out domestic chores where necessary. George Wilson and John Barton care for the Davenports as best they can. In response to her blindness, Job "assumed many of Margaret's little household duties" (197). Job and Jennings learned to care for Margaret as a baby.

dwelt upon and enjoyed the idea of some day becoming a lady, and doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood. It was a comfort to her, when scolded by Miss Simmonds, to think of the day when she would drive up to the door in her own carriage, to order her gowns from the hasty tempered, yet kind dressmaker. It was a pleasure to her to hear the general admiration of the two elder Miss Carsons, acknowledged beauties in ballroom and street, on horseback and on foot, and to think of the time when she should ride and walk with them in loving sisterhood. (121)

The irony of her situation is that Carson is attracted to her because of her very difference from the young women of his world. Her working-class "keen practical shrewdness" contrasts with the notions of middle-class romance, "the simple, foolish, unworldly ideas" she had acquired from the reading recommended by Miss Simmonds' "young ladies", and it is this which Carson finds "very bewitching" (121), a term itself deriving from romance. However one of the reasons why Mary wishes to escape the world of work for the world of leisure, as she perceives the difference to be, shows Mary to have already the potential for middle-class womanly goodness. Her thoughts for her father, that he might live with her "in a grand house" where he "should have newspapers, and pamphlets, and pipes, and meat dinners, every day, - and all day long if he liked" (121), display the requisite attention to others, and her own self-abnegation. She believes that:

the best of her plans, the holiest, that which in some way redeemed the vanity of the rest, were those relating to her father; her dear father, now oppressed with care, and always a disheartened gloomy person. How she would surround him with every comfort she could devise ... till he should acknowledge riches to be very pleasant things, and bless his lady daughter! (121)

Although Gaskell is mocking Mary and the ideology itself, and implying that such a feeling is often paradoxically better for the person giving than the person receiving, even so, this aspect of Mary's character is established.

The naïvety of Mary's dream is also underscored by the mention of her aunt Esther, as well as the narrator's comment that "such is the contrariness of the human heart, from Eve downwards, that we all, in our old-Adam state, fancy things forbidden sweetest" (121). The association with Esther and Eve implies that Mary can be only heading for a fall. Mary remembers Esther's promise to make her a lady, and she is aware of her own beauty, her own sexual attractiveness, without being aware of the dangers that this implies. The narrator comments: "if their [Esther's and the factory workers'] remarks had fallen on an unheeding ear, there were always young men enough, in a different rank from her own, who were willing to compliment the pretty weaver's daughter as they met her in the streets" (62). Although Mary wants to be a lady, "the rank to which she firmly believed her *lost* Aunt Esther had arrived" (62, emphasis added), the probability is that she will become a prostitute, and she is unaware that her belief is ironic, since Esther is "lost" - to respectability. The address to the middle-class reader, however, as well as the implication that middle-class young men are involved in, if not the cause of, a woman's fall, makes sure that Mary is not condemned, and that prostitution always remains only a potential fate. Nevertheless, Mary is not shown to be "other" and "different", singled out by her class, for the narrator emphasizes the way in which she is the same as all girls: "Before my telling you so truly what folly Mary felt or thought, injures her without redemption in your opinion, think what are the silly fancies of sixteen years of age in every class, and under all circumstances" (62). Although this might be read as an appeal to her youth to excuse her, it can also be taken as a definition of all girls as the same, rather than different, and, as with Acton, implicating and problematizing the sexuality of all women. Gaskell has, in fact, raised Mary to the ranks to which she aspires - or brought all women down to her level.

A similar implication about women's sexuality can be seen in the changes in Esther. Before she disappeared, she was seen "in her Sunday gown, and with a new ribbon in her bonnet, and gloves on her hands, like the lady she was so fond of thinking herself" (43). But the change was in more than clothing and the wish to appear like a lady. Somehow, by taking on the clothes of the middle class, Esther behaved more in accordance with the middle-class ideal. When Wilson asked Barton if Esther had been different in her manner, Barton replied that she was "a bit quieter, and more womanly-like; more gentle, and more blushing, and not so riotous and noisy" (44). Thus Esther, by imitating the middle-class ideal of femininity, has become acceptable for middle-class attention. She no longer acts like the independent working girl, and it is her very "middle classness" that makes her kind of sexuality attractive to her seducer.¹⁵

Working-class sexuality, on the other hand, is far more open, not "quieter" but "noisy". When Jem snatches a kiss from Mary, although she gives the expected response and blushes "rosy red", the blush is "more from anger than shame", and she slaps his face, saying "take that for old acquaintance sake, then" (47). Mary is infuriated but not shocked when "two rude lads, standing at a disorderly house-door" call out that "Polly Barton's gotten a sweetheart" (49). Nor, for the working class is there any mystique about maternity. At thirteen Mary sees her mother die in childbirth, and she is the sole survivor of the children in her family, as is Jem in his. Infant mortality, from weakness and undernourishment, accounts for many of the numerous deaths in the novel. Yet for all the overt sexuality, and down-to-earth knowledge of life, birth and death that Mary has, she is still innocent:

¹⁵ When Esther later reappears and visits Mary to bring her the clue that exonerates Jem and implicates Barton, she changes her dress, this time to that "befitting the wife of a working-man ... which had a sort of sanctity to the eyes of the streetwalker, as being the appropriate garb of that happy class to which she could never, never more belong" (292). Here the implication is not only that respectable clothing confers respectability upon the wearer, but that Esther has learnt her lesson, and no longer desires to be seen as middle-class.

For be it remembered, she had the innocence, or the ignorance, to believe his intentions honourable; and he, feeling that at any price he must have her, only that he would obtain her as cheaply as he could, had never undeceived her; while Sally Leadbitter laughed in her sleeve at them both, and wondered how it would all end, - whether Mary would gain her point of marriage, with her sly affectation of believing such to be Mr Carson's intention in courting her. (180)

Here Gaskell makes the first connection between innocence and ignorance that she will develop to a greater extent in *Ruth* and *North and South*. But unlike that of Margaret Hale, Mary's ignorance is rather surprising, and shows her mistaken belief in the truth of the romantic fantasies she has conjured for her future. The knowledgeable Sally sees Mary's innocence as a ploy to further her interests, implying that women can exploit their sexuality because it is another saleable item. But Sally's more realistic view of Mary's potential future only serves to implicate, once more, middle-class women's sexuality. Here again is the disturbing equation of the good woman and the whore, as expressed by Greg and others, where the only difference between them is marriage.

Carson certainly sees working-class women as commodities in his attitude to Mary. But when Mary lets go of her romantic dreams and realizes her love for Jem, she confronts Carson. Mary no longer uses the language of romance, but what Gaskell perceives as the language of "truth", whereas Carson still woos as the romantic lover: "you little witch! ... you sweet little coquette ... you're a darling little rascal to go on in this way" (180). His cajoling could be discounted as pure stereotyping, Carson as a flat character, the villainous lover lifted straight from melodrama. But by juxtaposing two discourses, the honest working-class girl speaking the truth, and middle-class romantic fiction, Gaskell exposes the hypocrisy latent in the latter, where romance is a disguise for the ploy of seduction and exploitation of women's sexuality. Mary speaks out "calmly and

boldly"; Carson considers her in the light of "woman's nature", "showing a little womanly fondness for coquetting" and cannot believe that she is not joking. His conceit is contrasted with Jem's steadfastness and belief in the honesty of Mary's words when she refuses him. For Carson, Mary's words are disbelieved: "She'll come round, you may depend upon it. Women always do" (185). But when Jem takes her at her word, and does not return to propose again, Mary must wait patiently, and, as a woman, not speak out about her love. As Margaret advises her, "Ay, dear; being patient is the hardest work we, any on us, have to do through life, I take it" (190).

"Laborare est orare": work, gender and class

Mary's finding her true work is part of her growth in self-knowledge through the novel. Gaskell was not exceptional in her concern with the need to find "some appointed work to do". According to Walter Houghton, "except for 'God', the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been 'work'".¹⁶ Work was illuminated by Ford Madox Brown and extolled by Carlyle in his belief that "Laborare est orare". To Carlyle "blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness".¹⁷ Gaskell used a quotation from Carlyle's *Biography* as the motto for the title page of the original edition of *Mary Barton*, and was delighted when Carlyle wrote in praise of the book shortly after its publication.¹⁸ In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell explores the various implications of

¹⁶ Houghton 242. Nina Auerbach comments about women writers and their part in the culture of the day, differing from those critics who trace a distinctly women's tradition: "women are written about differently from men, but they write as members of a common culture". Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 12, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843; London: Everyman, 1950) 190. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the abbreviation *PandP*. Michael Wheeler makes the connection between *Mary Barton* and Carlyle's works in "The Writer as Reader in *Mary Barton*", *Durham University Journal* 36 (1974,): 93.

¹⁸ Gaskell wrote to her publisher, "In the midst of all my deep and great annoyance, Mr Carlyle's letter has been most valuable, and has given me almost the only unmixed pleasure I have yet received". Carlyle guessed that the book, published anonymously, was by a woman, and

work and its counterparts, leisure and idleness, and what she perceived its meaning to be for men and women, working and middle classes. Although the women of the two classes are brought together through their problematic sexuality, they are differentiated again by Gaskell's attitude to work.¹⁹

If the working class are defined in relation to work by their very name, in *Mary Barton* the definition of middle-class women is by the very opposite - leisure. As has already been mentioned, Barton does not want Mary to become a "do-nothing lady". Yet this is the attraction of middle-class life for Mary. Even before Harry Carson appears, she has chosen an occupation which will further her on this route. Miss Simmonds's establishment apes middle-class gentility, and masks its true connection with honest toil, in the terms it uses for its workers - "the work women were called 'her young ladies'" (63).

The Miss Carsons serve as foils to Mary and as examples of the very leisure she craves. They are not necessary to their household in the way Mary, Margaret, and Sally are to theirs, but are merely pets and ornamentation, who "while away the time until tea-hour" (254). Amy's "bird-like songs and her playful caresses" amuse her father in his loneliness (107). The tiredness of the older daughters after a night of amusement at a ball contrasts strongly with the necessities of working-class life, with Alice or Mary going to work early after being awake all

reflected the usual gender-detection of the day: "Dear Madam, (For I catch the treble of that fine melodious voice very well)". Gérin 89.

¹⁹ Helena Michie argues that woman's work in Victorian novels "is carried on in the lacunae of the text", because work is concerned with the visibility of the body. In *Mary Barton*, she asserts, "we never actually sees Mary at work as a dressmaker; we see instead, in great detail, her domestic preparation for her father's comfort when *he* comes home from work. Mary's work and body are thus domesticated". I would agree with this in so far as the domestication of Mary is necessary for her move into the middle class, but at the same time I would argue that Gaskell investigates the nature of "work" in the novel in terms of both class and gender. Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 36, 38, 39ff.

night caring for the sick. Mary aspires to become another Mrs Carson, yet there is warning enough in the Mrs Carson Gaskell describes:

Mrs Carson was (as was usual with her, when no particular excitement was going on), very poorly, and sitting up-stairs in her dressing-room, indulging in the luxury of a head-ache. She was not well, certainly; "Wind in the head" the servants called it. But it was but the natural consequence of the state of mental and bodily idleness in which she was placed. Without education enough to value the resources of wealth and leisure, she was so circumstanced as to command both. It would have done her more good than all the aether and sal-volatile she was daily in the habit of swallowing, if she might have taken the work of one of her own housemaids for a week; made beds, rubbed tables, shaken carpets, and gone out into the fresh morning air, without all the paraphernalia of shawl, cloak, boa, fur boots, bonnet, and veil, in which she was equipped before setting out for an "airing", in the closely shut-up carriage. (254)

We are left wondering whether Mary would, in fact, fare any better. Mrs Carson has risen to the middle class because of her husband's rise in wealth and status, but the social disjunction she suffers is reflected in her illness. She is literally "ill-at-ease". The moral implications of the contrasting words, "leisure" and "idleness", are clear. She would be better to find some work, and be less of a "lady". For Gaskell, as for Sarah Ellis, the ideal of work is the key to her construction of a new and healthy middle-class woman.

Gaskell is intent on breaking down the opposition between work and leisure, by showing the negative implications of both work and idleness. Leisure can, in fact, represent another kind of work, but for Gaskell, as for Carlyle, "in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair" (*PandP*, 189). Work signifies more than mere employment, although the importance of this aspect is immense. Work can also be connected with action and activity, and much in the book hinges on actions, their purpose and their consequences. For Mary, in particular, "the real desire to get Work done will itself lead [her] more and more to truth"

(*PandP*, 189). Gaskell was not unaware of the ironies, for the working class, in an attitude such as Carlyle's, that "'an endless significance lies in Work;' a man perfects himself by working" (*PandP*, 189). For men like John Barton, work was a necessity, not on grounds of spiritual advancement, but for the daily survival of their families and themselves. Carlyle himself deplored "the lot of those same dumb millions of toilers so entirely unbearable as it is", who "work sore and yet gain nothing" (*PandP*, 203). Job Legh, on the other hand, is employed in a factory, but his true work, in the Carlylean sense, is what he does in his leisure time. Margaret is glad that her grandfather "is so fond of his books, and his creatures, and his plants" (79). His interest in natural history makes him "earnest, and pleased, and eager". As Margaret shows in her singing, her grandfather shows in his studies, that "Laborare est orare". But although leisure is thus morally superior to idleness, for the poor it is taken at the expense of remuneration. Margaret must take in more sewing, to the detriment of her failing eyesight, because Job takes time off work "for botanizing or going after insects" (85), and he spends much needed money on specimens. This contrasts strongly with the leisure of the factory owners. When Carson's mill closes after the fire, he in fact saves money, since he does not have to pay wages. The "men of business" spend their leisure time becoming acquainted with their families, a knowledge, Gaskell implies, the working class, through their self-help and caring for each other, have all the time. Thus bad times, which bring leisure for the factory owners mean idleness for the workers, death and despair for the Davenports, and disillusionment for John Barton.

In her concern for women, Gaskell was aware of the economic necessity for working-class women of finding some kind of work - "Mary must do something" (61). But for women too, work is shown to be more than just a way of earning money. In work there is salvation and health; work, as the writing of the novel attests, was a way of overcoming grief and depression. Margaret

comments, "it does do good ... in setting people (as is cast down by sorrow and feels themselves unable to settle to any thing but crying) something to do" (84); and when Mary is stunned by the knowledge of Jem's arrest and her father's guilt, the narrator explains the need for "some kind of action (bodily or mental)" when distressed. "Something to be done implies that there is yet hope of some good thing to be accomplished, or some additional evil that may be avoided; and by degrees the hope absorbs much of the sorrow" (301). There is a marked contrast between the passive, weeping, starving Mrs Davenport in the cellar, and the busy, organizing, planning Mrs Davenport, who, as a widow, must provide for her family. In work, therefore, a woman can find a purpose in life, "what *we* have to do in advancing the Kingdom of God", as Gaskell wrote to Eliza Fox; like Carlyle she believed "Idleness is worst, Idleness alone is without hope: work earnestly at anything, you will by degrees learn to work at almost all things. There is endless hope in work" (*PandP*, 141).

Mary, therefore, must find her proper work, and her elevation in social status relies upon it. She must choose between the bold, noisy, overt sexuality of the working-class girl, with no idea of propriety or modesty such as the "vulgar-minded" Sally (132), and middle-class values: not those falsely put forward by "romances", but modesty, propriety, good conduct, maternity and caring for others, as well as knowledge of one's proper work. For Mary entry to the middle-class cannot come through marriage or be for the acquisition of money and leisure. She must earn her place. If the first half of the novel is taken up with the implications of work, leisure and idleness for the various characters, the second half concentrates on activity and action, on the story of the murder, the search for Will Wilson, the trial and its resolution. Many critics have found in this second half the major flaws in the novel; for example, "much of the melodramatic plotting of the novel, such as ... the pursuit of Will Wilson (22-

32), is redundant";²⁰ or, in this section Gaskell attempts "to evade political analysis and to divert attention from her own 'social message'".²¹ But if the novel is read as being about the nature of work, the discrepancy is not so great. For this part of the book concentrates on Mary's great work, her purpose in life, her search to vindicate Jem and to protect her father. Having been led astray through her vanity and her employment, to seek riches and leisure, Mary is saved from this error by her realisation of her love for Jem. Yet her previous actions have had disastrous consequences, and she is the only one who can make this right.²² This part of the book can be read, therefore, less as a melodrama, with Mary as the heroine, than as another form of romance, a quest story with Mary as the "hero" - that is, with Mary taking an active rather than a passive role.²³

Mary and true work: different kinds of heroine

Two women in the novel cast Mary as a heroine. Margaret would have Mary as passively feminine, her work to be patiently waiting for Jem to declare

²⁰ Michael Wheeler, *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1979) 58.

²¹ Elaine Jordan, "Spectres and Scorpions: Allusion and Confusion in *Mary Barton*", *Literature and History* 7.1 (1981): 56.

²² The interplay of actions and their consequences forms one of the many parallels between Mary and her father. Near the end of the story Job Legh comments to her "thou'rt more like thy father than ever thou wert before" (423). Mary is aware that, "too late repentant of her light conduct which had led to such fatal consequences, she was now most anxious to save her old play-fellow" (305), as John becomes, finally, "almost crushed with the knowledge of the consequences of his own action" (435).

²³ However, I do not see Mary fitting into the archetypal patterns of female experience within the novel as described by Annis Pratt, in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, with Barbara White, Andrea Loewenstein and Mary Wier (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981). Although Mary is socialized and confined in domesticity at the end of the novel, in one way that Pratt traces ("Novels of Marriage"), her journey is into an alien and hostile world rather than the empowering "green world" of nature found in Pratt's argument. Marjorie Stone notes that "Mary is associated even more insistently than her father with epic and tragic figures, a feature often overlooked by those who see her simply as a domestic heroine" and that in Chapter 23, "a gender reversal figures her as the archetypal romance hero", Marjorie Stone, "Bakhtinian Polyphony in *Mary Barton*; Class, Gender, and the Textual Voice", *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, Vol. 20, eds. Michael Timko, Fred Kaplan, and Edward Guilano (New York: AMS Press, 1991) 189.

his love once again. But for Mary, "day after day passed away, and patience seemed of no avail" (205). She is compared with Tennyson's Mariana, a comparison which has the effect of ennobling her, raising her to the class of traditional heroines, and associating her with romance. However Mary finds patience difficult:

At times she thought she could bear this meekly, happy in her own constant power of loving. For of change or of forgetfulness she did not dream. Then at other times her state of impatience was such, that it required all her self-restraint to prevent her from going and seeking him out, and (as man would do to man, or woman to woman) begging him to forgive her hasty words. (224)

As a woman Mary is constrained from communicating with Jem, since she must keep to her proper sphere. Her plight highlights a problem for Gaskell, for in creating a strong, active, independent woman, she runs the risk of that woman being declared unfeminine. At this point of the story Gaskell emphasizes Mary's naturally feminine behaviour to have her conform to the womanly ideal:

She believed it was her friend's words that seemed to make such a simple action impossible, in spite of all the internal urgings. But a friend's advice is only thus powerful, when it puts into language the secret oracle of our souls. It was the whisperings of her womanly nature that caused her to shrink from any unmaidenly action, not Margaret's counsel. (224)

In *North and South* Margaret Hale is faced with a similar problem, of being unable to declare her love to Thornton, and she, too, wishes she were a man, to be able to talk directly and openly. But in that novel Gaskell shows how restrictive such "whisperings" are. That women cannot speak their love, with its implications of sexuality and desire, is shown in *Mary Barton* as natural behaviour.

Sally Leadbitter, too, persistently tries to read Mary as a heroine. Sally works with Mary, dressmaking at Miss Simmonds' establishment, which, Gaskell emphasizes, is an extension of the separate domestic sphere, a secluded feminine realm "where the chief talk was of fashion, and dress, and parties to be given, for which such and such gowns would be wanted, varied with a slight whispered interlude occasionally about love and lovers" (140). The public masculine world does not enter - Mary "had not heard the political news of the day" (141) - except as sensation and scandal. In some ways Sally is the antithesis of the feminine ideal. She does not behave modestly or with propriety. But the most noticeable way in which she differs is that she speaks out; she has a voice and is prepared to use it. Moreover, in her way, she is a journalist or reporter, who narrates stories for those around her. Yet her independence of mind and speech is condemned by Gaskell. Sally is shown consistently in a negative light, except for her love for her mother, for whom "she had self-denial" (132). However, Sally's "self-denial" for people other than her mother is shown to be a perversion of the true feminine self-abnegation. Sally does things for others, in order to live through their lives, since she cannot be a heroine in her own:

Sally Leadbitter was vulgar-minded to the last degree; never easy unless her *talk* was of love and lovers; in her eyes it was an honour to have had a long list of wooers. So constituted, it was a pity that Sally herself was but a plain, red-haired, freckled, girl; never likely, one would have thought, to become a heroine on her own account. But what she lacked in beauty she tried to make up for by a kind of *witty boldness*, which gave her, what her betters would have called piquancy. Considerations of modesty or propriety never checked her *utterance* of a good thing. She had just enough talent to corrupt others. Her very good-nature was an evil influence. They could not hate one who was so kind; they could not avoid one who was so willing to shield them from scrapes by any exertion of her own; whose ready fingers would at any time make up for their deficiencies, and whose still more *convenient tongue would at any time invent for them*. (132, emphases added)

Her interest in Mary's courtship with Harry Carson is not motivated only by monetary interests, the rewards she gets for acting as a go-between. She is interested in it as the development of a romantic plot, "for the mere excitement of the thing" (132), and to wonder "how it would all end" (180). When Mary becomes involved in the Carson murder trial, Sally revels in the attention she can gain as "Gazette Extraordinary" (335) at Miss Simmonds:

She was really curious to see Mary; her connexion with a murderer seemed to have made her into a sort of *lusus naturae*, and was almost, by some, expected to have made a change in her personal appearance, so earnestly did they stare at her....[Sally] looked her over and over (a very different thing from looking her through and through), and almost learnt her off by heart; - "her every-day gown (Hoyle's print you know, that lilac thing with the high body) she was so fond of ..." (334, emphasis in original)

Mary has become a spectacle, and Sally's perception of her is filtered through the world of romances and theatre. She declares, "Really, Mary, you'll turn out quite a heroine" (335) and "You've set up heroine on your own account" (426). She views the trial as entertainment, a theatre in which Mary should act out a predetermined role. She deplores Mary's lack of interest in her clothing, and is excited by the fact that the story was in the newspapers, thus gaining the authority of a written text. She even writes her own role, far different from Mary's need to tell the truth: "Well! if I've ever the luck to go witness on a trial, see if I don't pick up a better beau than the prisoner. I'll aim at a lawyer's clerk, but I'll not take less than a turnkey" (427). She still thinks of Jem as guilty: "not that I should think much the worse of a spirited young fellow for falling foul of a rival, - they always do at the theatre. ... Why, you see, they've always swords quite handy at them plays" (427).

But Sally's shallow two-dimensional view, concerned as it is with appearances, denies Mary true heroic stature. Gaskell points out that Sally was

"incapable of comprehending her suffering" (335). The use Gaskell makes of the discourse of romance and theatre implies she was perfectly aware that her story might have charges of melodrama levelled against it. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer writes, "the witty, markedly literary, self-consciousness in the treatment of Sally is sustained throughout the novel, making it very clear that Gaskell is offering, by way of contrast, a very different kind of woman's heroism".²⁴ Sally's attitude underlines the differences between the conventional melodrama and the role Mary does take in this novel - strong, active, a journey towards self-knowledge, usually the domain of the hero. Thus rather than condemning the way Gaskell "lapses into the melodramatic", we must look at the way she appropriates the convention and makes use of it deliberately, both to echo and expose the "romance" of the lives of the characters. Mary's story is the stuff of melodrama, but it is also a construction of possible alternative roles. In her quest to reveal the truth of Jem's innocence and conceal the truth of her father's guilt, Mary grows from being the stereotypical blue-eyed, blond-haired heroine of romance, to a woman capable of heroic actions.

After Esther's visit with the evidence that clears Jem and implicates her father, Mary realizes that she must no longer wait, but act, alone. She "re-entered her home after she had filled her pitcher, with a still stronger sense of anxiety, and a still clearer conviction of how much rested upon her unassisted and friendless self, alone with her terrible knowledge, in the hard, cold, populous world" (303). She was "alone in the world with her secret" (307), and, in thinking of Jem, "even if she could have gone to him, I believe she would not. She longed to do all herself; to be his liberator, his deliverer; to win him life, though she might never regain his lost love, by her own exertions" (312).

²⁴ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, "Private Grief and Public Acts in *Mary Barton*", *Dickens Studies Annual* Vol. 9, eds. Michael Timko, Fred Kaplan, and Edward Guilano (New York: AMS Press, 1981) 209.

Mary must have faith in her own powers and journey out into the world to seek out the truth. She is compared with Spenser's Una, travelling through "the wilderness and danger" (302). However, "with the call upon her exertions, and her various qualities of judgement and discretion, came the answering consciousness of innate power to meet the emergency" (302) and she acts "with wise deliberation of purpose" (303). She was unwilling to let Job go in her stead, and she remain in the passive feminine role:

Now Mary disliked this plan inexpressibly; her dislike was partly grounded on reason, and partly on feeling. She could not bear the idea of deputing to any one the active measures necessary to be taken in order to save Jem. She felt as if they were her duty, her right. She durst not trust to any one the completion of her plan; they might not have the energy, or perseverance, or desperation enough to follow out the slightest chance. ... No one could have her motives; and consequently no one could have her sharpened brain, her despairing determination. Besides (only that was purely selfish), she could not endure the suspense of remaining quiet, and only knowing the result when all was accomplished. (340)

It is blind Margaret who sees the change in her and "began to love her again" as "the same, sweet, faulty, impulsive, lovable creature she had known in the former Mary Barton, but with more of dignity, self-reliance, and purpose" (318). Even Sally Leadbitter reports that Mary wore "a little black silk handkerchief just knotted around her neck, *like a boy*" (334, emphasis added). Mary is associated with masculine heroic attributes: "Picture to yourself (for I cannot tell you) the armies of thoughts that met and clashed in her brain; and then imagine the effort it cost her to be calm, and quiet, and even, in a faint way, cheerful and smiling at times" (329). She "struggled and triumphed (though a sadly-bleeding victor at heart)" (330) to conceal her pain.

During her journey to Liverpool, down the river to Will's ship, and throughout the trial, it is as if Mary finds herself in a strange new world, the

public realm of the masculine sphere, where as a woman she is not only an intruder, but a foreigner, barred from entering into communication because she lacks the appropriate language. Much of her journey seems to her like a dream, as she passes, like the questing hero, from the ordinary into the unfamiliar. She is "bewildered by the hurry, the noise of the people, and bells, and horns; the whiz and scream of the arriving trains" (345), and, as did the narrator in the unfamiliar world of medieval dream visions, she needs a guide. Charley leads her through the maze of Liverpool, for she says, "I never was here before, and I don't know my way to the place you speak on" (349). At the docks all is strange; it is like another land:

The cries of the sailors, the variety of language used by the passers-by, and the entire novelty of the sight compared with any thing which Mary had ever seen, made her feel most helpless and forlorn; and she clung to her young guide as to one who alone by his superior knowledge could interpret between her and the new race of men by whom she was surrounded, - for a new race sailors might reasonably be considered, to a girl who had hitherto seen none but inland dwellers, and those for the greater part factory people. In that new world of sight and sound, she still bore one pervading thought ... of reaching Will. (351)

Language belongs to the realm of the masculine, of the father's authority and of law and order, and Mary must battle this in order to proclaim and to hide the truth.²⁵ When she realized that Will can give Jem an alibi she "determined to apply to Job, as one of the few among her acquaintance gifted with the knowledge of hard words, for to her, all terms of law, or natural history, were alike many-syllabled mysteries" (304). Then, faced with the word of law, a subpoena calling her as witness at the trial, one of "those mysterious pieces of parchment", Mary

²⁵ Patsy Stoneman discusses aspects of fatherhood and male/female voice in the novel. She writes that the novel's "impulse is profoundly maternal. Yet its most notable absence is Mary's mother ... The 'mother's voice' speaks in the public world only through men - not only the male characters of the novel but also the male writers whose 'language' define its parameters". Stoneman 85. I agree with Stoneman that Gaskell uses the masculine tradition of writers such as Carlyle to authorize her text, but I see the ending of the novel in different terms from her.

"looked at the unusual appearance of the writing, which, though legible enough, conveyed no idea to her, or rather her mind shut itself up against receiving any idea" (313). At the Liverpool dock Charley has to talk with the sailors "in slang, which to Mary was almost inaudible, and quite unintelligible" (352), and as the boatmen argue about the pilot ship's return with Will, "Mary tried to understand them; but independently of their nautical language, a veil seemed drawn over her mind, and she had no clear perception of any thing that passed. Her very words seemed not her own, and beyond her power of control, for she found herself speaking quite differently to what she meant" (359). She reaches the point where she is speechless: "She disliked speaking, her power over words seemed so utterly gone. She used quite different expressions to those she intended. So she kept silent" (378).

The loss of control over words, where she speaks "in weak broken sentences" (378), is also reflected in the change in her voice from its sweet feminine tones to something unrecognizable. This is first noticed by Job, who "was struck by her voice, her changed miserable voice" (314), as she questions him "in a voice from which all the pith and marrow of strength seemed extracted ... again, in the same hoarse, feeble voice" (313). Mrs Wilson also notices the change: "Mary spoke, but in so changed and choked a voice that the old woman almost started. It seemed as if some third person must be in the room, the voice was so hoarse and strange" (281). In the public world of men, it is as if she cannot speak in her own voice. Confronting the sailors on Will's ship, and asked "her more particular desire", "her throat was dry; all musical sound had gone out of her voice; but in a loud harsh whisper she told the men her errand of life and death" (358).

The most public arena which Mary enters is the courtroom. The trial scene is constructed in theatrical terms, a drama staged with the voices of the crowd

commenting on the proceedings. Mary is placed under the spotlight: "the mellow sunlight streamed down that high window on her head, and fell on the rich treasure of her golden hair" (389).²⁶ However she has transcended her class and her stereotypic image:

many who were looking for mere flesh and blood beauty, mere colouring, were disappointed: for her face was deadly white, and almost set in its expression, while a mournful bewildered soul looked out of the depths of those soft, deep, grey eyes. But others recognized a higher and stranger kind of beauty; one that would keep its hold on the memory for many after years. (389)

Once again, Gaskell makes play with the conventions, in order to show Mary as something new, a different kind of heroine, one who can take on heroic qualities. In the courtroom she overcame her faintness and fear of betraying her father and "exerted every power she had to keep in the full understanding of what was going on, of what she was asked, and of what she answered", for she realized "that true-sounding words were being extracted from her"(389). In public, before the gaze of men and women, she declares that which a woman should not admit to, her love for a man:

And who was he, that he should dare so lightly to ask of her heart's secrets? That he should dare to ask her to tell, before that multitude assembled there, what woman usually whispers with blushes and tears, and many hesitations, to one ear alone? ... Suddenly her resolution was taken. The present was everything; the future, that vast shroud, it was maddening to think upon; but *now* she might own her fault, but *now* she might even own her love. Now, when the beloved stood thus, abhorred of men, there would be no feminine shame to stand between her and her avowal. (390)

²⁶ Mary is compared in the text with the engraving from the renaissance painting of Beatrice Cenci, but Gaskell also makes an indirect reference to another artistic tradition, that of illustrators like Hogarth and Cruikshank. Examples are the use of sunlight through a window as a spotlight in Cruikshank's illustration of Fagin in his cell in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, and Phiz's illustration of Florence's return to Dombey, "Let him remember it in that room, years to come", where a shaft of sunlight through the doorway as Florence enters spotlights Dombey in the gloom.

In the court she bravely announces her own new-found self-knowledge, that she had been "giddy and vain", and had indulged in romantic fantasies, but now realized "the strength of her attachment" (391) to Jem.

Nevertheless the reading of Mary as heroic is not unproblematic. Mary is divided at this moment of, in Nina Auerbach's terms, "dangerous volatility".²⁷ From the time she hears of Jem's arrest and makes her resolution to save him, Mary is portrayed in a series of oppositions. Although Gaskell consciously uses Sally's comparison of Mary with a heroine to show that Mary is different from the stereotype, at the same time she undercuts her own differentiation by showing Mary weak as well as strong, passive as well as active, infantile as well as heroic.²⁸ Illness and power are constantly counterpointed through Mary's journey and the courtroom scene, culminating in her collapse after the trial. As she takes on the masculine role of deliverer, Mary is divided in herself, constantly battling with her need to remain feminine. Or rather, Gaskell, in her construction of Mary, needs to assert Mary's natural femininity as she strays from the private to the public realm. Thus at the same time as Mary is described as having determination, energy, perseverance, and resolution, she attracts Job by her "pretty, child-like gesture; and when she drew near him, afterwards, like a little creature sidling up to some person whom it feels to have offended, he bent down and blessed her, as if she had been a child of his own" (342). After her river journey, when the old sailor takes her to his home: "she arose and followed him, with the unquestioning docility of a little child" (362).

²⁷ Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 17. Like Mary, Barton "beaten down by some inward storm" is "two persons, - one, the father who had dandled her on his knee, and loved her all her life lone; the other, the assassin, the cause of all her trouble and woe" (413).

²⁸ For Rosemarie Bodenheimer these oppositions "co-exist rather uncomfortably, corresponding to the opposition of domestic passivity and political action in the John Barton sections". She sees Mary not in gender terms but as two types of heroine, one of "domestic life", the other of "rescue", and comments "these two portraits are clearly not compatible", Bodenheimer, "Private Grief" 210.

Mary too is aware that her heroic strength is limited. Faced with Will's departure, she lapses into incoherence: "I am so helpless, so weak, - but a poor girl after all" (347) and the "after all" makes one wonder what she had thought she was. Of course within the plot, Mary's tiredness and fading strength is appropriate to the psychological "realism" of the novel.²⁹ She is, indeed, but a girl, alone in unfamiliar surroundings, stretched emotionally by anxiety for her father and Jem, and physically by lack of sleep. But on another level, the contrast between the passive and active Mary underlines Gaskell's own ambivalence about creating a truly independent woman. Although Mary has special qualities which make her different from the middle-class lady, for it is stressed that "she was far superior in sense and spirit to the mother she mourned" (64), and "a lady by right of nature" (216), she is placed within the ideology of the domestic ideal, not out of it. Therefore her newness is in Gaskell's redefining of the ideal to include those qualities of strength and purpose which Mary possesses. Her collapse after the trial is to be seen as a process of resocializing her, and bringing her back into the feminine sphere.

Mary's decline and domestication: duty, femininity and reductive womanhood

"Poor Mary's fearful attack of illness" (395) takes her:

where no words of peace, no soothing hopeful tidings could reach her; in the ghastly spectral world of delirium. Hour after hour, day after day, she started up with passionate cries on her father to save Jem; or rose wildly, imploring the winds and waves, the pitiless winds and waves, to have mercy; and over and over again she exhausted her feverish fitful strength in these agonised entreaties, and fell back powerless, uttering only the wailing moans of despair. They told her Jem was safe, she brought him before her eyes; but sight and hearing were no longer channels of information to that

²⁹ Coral Lansbury sees Mary's illness as "a refuge from a reality that has become unendurable". Coral Lansbury, *Elizabeth Gaskell: the Novel of Social Crisis* (London: Paul Elek, 1975) 46.

poor distracted brain, nor could human voice penetrate her understanding. (401)

The name of the Father, the ordering power of the symbolic has escaped her and it is as if she has re-entered the semiotic, the unconscious. She undergoes what Julia Kristeva calls "the spectacular collapse of meaning", when "life no longer matters".³⁰ Mary is literally unconscious, and needs to be "reborn" to re-enter society, the social order, and take her place there refeminised and reclassified. Having stepped out of her place, taken on the masculine role of hero, in the quest for truth, living out one of Sally's romances but not as heroine, she must be resited in order to survive. Her illness is a metaphoric passage back into the symbolic realm, the realm of the father. Equally, the public spectacle of her proclamation of love, the affirmation to all of her sexuality, and the sacrifice of her good name must be obliterated by Mary's refound femininity. While she is ill, and "hovered between life and death" (415), she once more loses control of words: "How strange her voice sounds! Screech! Screech! and she so low, sweet-spoken, when she's well!" (402).

On her recovery there is a marked difference in Mary. She must go through a process of re-socialization. To begin with "she opened her eyes. Her mind was in the tender state of a lately-born infant's" (415). She is scarcely aware of those around her, and:

did not care to exert herself to ask any questions ... She fell softly into slumber, without a word having been spoken by any one during that half hour of inexpressible joy ... She wakened once more; her soft eyes opened, and met his over-bending look. She smiled gently, as a baby does when it sees its mother tending its little cot; and continued her innocent, infantine gaze into his face as if the sight gave her much unconscious pleasure. But by-and-by a different expression came into her sweet eyes; a look of memory

³⁰ Kristeva, *Black Sun* 53, 6. For a more general discussion of Kristeva's construction of depression and Gaskell's construction of the decline, see Chapter 4.

and intelligence; her white face flushed the brightest rosy red, and with feeble motion she tried to hide her head in the pillow. (416)

Mary cannot remain as a speechless child. It is necessary for her to return to the world, and she does so as a woman, rather than a girl, conscious of her own sexuality. This consciousness, which causes her to blush, is expressed in her love for Jem. When this love is contrasted with her attraction to Harry Carson, it can be seen that Gaskell, unlike Acton or Greg, endorses a need for physical attraction, sexual desire, to be present in "true love". Mary's love for Jem is based on mutual attraction, which for Gaskell must have an element of physical sexuality (as with Sylvia who desires her whaler-lover, rather than her cousin whom she marries; or with Phyllis Holman's love for Holdsworth). Mary's attraction to Carson, on the other hand, was based on superficial dreams of "romance", acting a part in a story. But even then for Gaskell, sexuality, signified by love (although it is only one element of that love), is to be unspoken, or spoken of in private, only to one, the beloved. To have one's sexuality declared publicly can bring great psychic dis-ease. The fear of Mary's remaining mad all her life constructs another potential role for her. At the height of her illness Jem despairs "what if, (worse than death) she remained a poor gibbering maniac all her life long (and mad people do live to be old sometimes, even under all the pressure of their burden), terror-distracted as she was now; and no one able to comfort her!" (404). Mary's madness has different elements: the public avowal of love, that is sexuality and desire, the fear of her father's guilt being exposed, the fear that Jem will be hanged, and the need for her to be re-socialized within her proper sphere. However, once she regains consciousness "from that time forward, Mary's progress towards health was rapid" (416).

As Rosemarie Bodenheimer comments, "illness purges [Mary], as it does many a middle-class heroine, of all but the most angelic and domestic

impulses".³¹ Mary is re-integrated, reborn, acknowledging her womanhood, but also feminized:

She, for her part, was softer and gentler than she had ever been in her gentlest mood; since her illness, her motions, her glances, her voice were all tender in their languor. It seemed almost a trouble to her to break the silence with the low sounds of her own sweet voice, and her words fell sparingly on Jem's greedy, listening ear. (418)

She is no longer the wilful, ambitious daughter, or the questing lover, but ready to be the dutiful wife: "Mary tottered once more out into the open air, leaning on Jem's arm, and close to his beating heart" (418). She has escaped the fate of Aunt Esther, but at a reduction of her own autonomy. There seems a great difference between the independent girl who for most of the novel looks after herself, and the woman at the end who, although she returns to fulfil her duty to her father, "most of all ... missed the delicious luxury she had lately enjoyed in having Jem's tender love at hand every hour of the day, to ward off every wind of heaven, and every disturbing thought" (425).

Thus Mary is brought within the fold of the feminine ideal. The independent working-class girl has turned into the domesticated middle-class wife. However, Gaskell was unable to maintain the illusion of realism, and have Mary be reclassified within her own society. In an ending which is often seen as being a weak answer to Britain's social problems at the time, Mary and Jem emigrate to Canada.³² However, in a vision that is utopian, Gaskell is being

³¹ Bodenheimer, "Private Grief" 213.

³² Examples of such criticism are: J. G. Sharp, "One is conscious, at the conclusion of the novel, of a certain falling off in inventive power. The marriage, emigration, and idyllic picture ... do give the impression of a tying-up of ends, of being the result of extra-literary requirements. The ending is, in some ways, escapist", J. G. Sharp, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of her Non-Biographic Works* (Sussex: Linden, 1970) 69; and Rosemarie Bodenheimer, "Gaskell goes on to apply the liberal-economist's pet panacea, voluntary emigration" ("Private Grief" 213); Lynette Felber, on the other hand, sees the ending as part of the romance structure underlying the novel,

paradoxically most "realistic". Mary and Jem have no way of rising socially in the Manchester of their time. Others, like Carson, have risen to become middle-class, but that was achievable earlier in the century. Nevertheless Jem has the ability to rise. He, through his own intelligence, enterprise and invention has already reached the position of foreman in the foundry where he works. He is described as "manly and dignified" (459), with an "honest, fearless, open countenance" (447) and thus has the appropriate nobility of character. In Canada he becomes an instrument-maker to the Agricultural College being established in Toronto, "a good appointment, - house, - land, - and a good percentage on the instruments made" (446). As a professional propertied man, he will become part of the colonial middle class. The last scene is of domestic bliss: the house, the garden, the land cleared and settled, the mother and children at the door waiting for the husband to arrive home: the feminine ideal has been achieved by Mary, but it takes exile from the class structures of England, to replicate the ideologies in the new world. The healthy new middle-class woman is no "do nothing lady", but one who, with her husband, each in their own spheres, epitomizes the new ideal of the nobility of work.

which begins and ends with a pastoral idyll, Lynette Felber, "Gaskell's Industrial Idylls: Ideology and Formal Incongruence in *Mary Barton* and *North and South*", *Clio* 18.1 (1988): 59.

Chapter 6

Ruth: The Fallen Madonna

I am so glad you like "Ruth". I was so anxious about her, and took so much pains over writing it, that I lost my power of judging, and could not tell whether I had done it well or ill. ... I tried to make both the story and the writing as quiet as I could, in order that "people" (my great bugbear) might not say that they could not see what the writer felt to be a very plain and earnest truth, for romantic incidents or exaggerated writing.

Elizabeth Gaskell, letter to R. Monkton Milnes¹

Many other wild, woe-begone creatures pressed forward with blessings on Ruth's son, while he could only repeat:

"She is my mother."

From that day forward Leonard walked erect in the streets of Eccleston, where "many arose and called her blessed."

Ruth

... he could find nothing to say but the simple words:

"My mother is dead, sir."

Ruth

If *Mary Barton* was born out of grieving motherhood, *Ruth* was conceived from a desire to expose a hypocritical social system which made victims of women and exonerated men. As Gaskell's friend W. R. Greg wrote,

Alas! is it not notorious that, of a hundred fathers who would fall upon the neck of the prodigal son, and hail his return with unlimited forgiveness, there is scarcely one who, obedient to the savage morality of the world, would not turn his back upon the erring and repentant daughter?²

Society, for Greg, was wrong in condemning the victim of "human infirmity". According to society,

¹ *Letters* 225.

² Greg, "Prostitution" 472.

hers is innate depravity, hopeless degradation, unworthiness which must be pushed out of sight, blotted from memory, ignored in good society and polite speech; *his* are the venial errors of youth, the ordinary tribute to natural desires, the common laxity of a man of the world.³

By elevating the repentant daughter, Gaskell also exposed the threat at the heart of the ideal of domestic femininity. In Ruth's espousal of an "aggressive desire" for self-sacrifice we find both an apotheosis of motherhood and its results if the metaphor of self-abnegation is taken to its literal conclusion.⁴

Critical reception of *Ruth* has been divided from the moment of publication. The major responses have centred around three issues: the novel's excessive religiosity; the fact that Ruth is so pure and innocent that she does not seem to need repentance and redemption; and the ending - is it not too harsh a punishment for Ruth to die after she has been socially re-established and accepted?⁵ Charlotte Brontë, having seen only a sketch of the plot, wrote to Gaskell:

³ Greg, "Prostitution" 474, emphasis in original.

⁴ Greg, "Prostitution" 459. Hilary Schor looks at Gaskell's use of conventions in a slightly different way. She argues that "in *Ruth* [Gaskell] is taking on existing literary conventions and examining them for what they do and do not allow a woman writer to say about female experience, and for the ways in which they appropriate and manipulate women as aesthetic objects and subjects of literary plotting", Hilary Schor, "The Plot of the Beautiful Ignoramus: *Ruth* and the Tradition of the Fallen Woman", *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. Regina Barreca (London: MacMillan, 1990) 159. Gail David sees Ruth as an embodiment of a diffuse concept of motherhood, in her roles as mother to Leonard, teacher to the Bradshaw girls, and nurse to the Eccleston community. For David, Ruth progresses through these stages to overcome patriarchy and present a radical alternative to its structures, although David would argue that Gaskell stops short of this final stage, and bowing to the needs of didacticism, transforms her sinner into an angel. I will argue, however, that this transformation is a crucial step in Gaskell's argument. Gail David, *Female Heroism in the Pastoral* (New York and London: Garland, 1991) 173-199.

⁵ See, for example, Monica Correa Frykstedt, *Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton" and "Ruth": a Challenge to Christian England* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1982); Margaret Ganz, *Elizabeth Gaskell: Artist in Conflict* (New York: Twayne, 1969); Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class And Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green UP, 1981); Alan Shelston, introduction, *Ruth*, by Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986); George Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984). Also Gérin, Lansbury, Schor, and Stoneman. Contemporary reviews included G. H. Lewes, "Villette and Ruth", *Edinburgh Review*, April 1853, and W. R. Greg, "False Morality of Lady Novelists", republished in *Literary and Social Judgments* (London: Trübner, 1869) 82-112.

Yet - hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo. And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration. If *that* commands the slaying of the victim no bystander has a right to put out his hand to stay the sacrificial knife; but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters.⁶

And, similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

I have just finished "Ruth". ... Hear the "echoes in the hills"! ... I love and honour your books - especially "Ruth" which is noble as well as beautiful, which contains truths purifying and purely put, yet treats of a subject scarcely ever boldly treated of except when taken up by unclean hands - I am grateful to you as a woman having treated such a subject - Was it quite impossible but that your Ruth should *die*? I had that thought of regret in closing the book - Oh, I must confess to it - Pardon me for the tears' sake!⁷

Both Brontë and Browning echo the metaphors employed by Gaskell which are part of the wider discourse on prostitution and women's sexuality, metaphors of religion, sacrifice and illness. For Brontë, Gaskell paradoxically sacrifices her heroine in order not to sacrifice her own artistic integrity. For Browning, Gaskell overcomes the silence constraining women who cannot speak out on a subject which is "unclean", and in doing so "purifies" with her healthy "truths". Social dis-ease is therefore assuaged by a woman's voice and actions, both of Gaskell the writer and Ruth the protagonist.

Gaskell, too, records the pain that it took to speak out on "an unfit subject for fiction".⁸ She wrote, "the only comparison I can find for myself is to St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows ... but I have spoken out my mind in the best way I can, and I have no doubt that what was meant so earnestly *must* do

⁶ Quoted in Gérin 132, emphasis in original.

⁷ Quoted in Gérin 140, emphasis in the original.

⁸ *Letters* 220.

some good, though perhaps not all the good, or not the *very* good I meant. I am in a quiver of pain about it".⁹ And to Eliza Fox, she lamented:

I *have* been so ill; I do believe it has been a "Ruth" fever. The beginning of last week my own private opinion was that I should never get better. ... - but oh! I was so poorly! and cd not get over the hard things people said of Ruth. I mean I was just in that feverish way when I could not get them out of my head by thinking of anything else but dreamt about them and all that. I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people. Now *should* you have burnt the 1st vol. of Ruth as so *very* bad? even if you have been a very anxious father of a family? Yet *two* men have; they sit next to us in Chapel and you can't think how "improper" I feel under their eyes.¹⁰

In a literal way, in her own life, Gaskell lived out the metaphor of illness as she was subjected to the public gaze, for venturing to speak, as a woman, in the public sphere.

Ruth, therefore, deals with the "improper", the tangled question of woman's sexuality. Patsy Stoneman traces the way in which Ruth's sexuality is constructed in terms of childhood innocence, expressed through the use of flower imagery, which continues after her actual "fall", and in terms of adult repression, once her sin has been articulated, ironically, by the young child in the village in Wales. This repression, according to Stoneman, manifests itself in Ruth's consciousness through storm and nightmare images.¹¹ For Stoneman, the novel "demonstrates that female sexuality can never be anything but a ghoulish nightmare in the language of patriarchal religion, because the proper response to visible sex was repentance - that is, repression".¹² She claims that in

⁹ *Letters* 220, emphases in original.

¹⁰ *Letters* 222, emphases and abbreviations in original.

¹¹ Stoneman 99-117.

¹² Stoneman 111.

the novel "sexuality appears as sickness", and that when Ruth enters Bellingham/Donne's sick-chamber at the end,

she effectively commits suicide, not only because of the typhus but because she thus allows the sexual bond to come into consciousness, defying the formula that repentance = repression, without either changing her view of Bellingham's worthlessness or having any way of reconciling desire with judgement. The result is ideological incoherence and madness.¹³

Through the book there is certainly a tension between Ruth's unconscious desires. However, I would argue, those conflicting desires are her physical attraction to Bellingham, which continues even after her realization that "Leonard's father is a bad man", and her passion to be the ideal mother, thus transforming her sexuality into the model of domestic femininity.¹⁴ In other words, the tension lies between Gaskell's perception of women's physical desires which she will not deny, although they are unspeakable, and the demands that women's sexuality be constructed solely as the desire for maternity, and expressed through self-abnegation. Although I would agree with Stoneman that Ruth's death is a form of suicide, I cannot agree with her perception of sexuality as a constant given which is then repressed or hidden. If sexuality, as Foucault argues, is constructed by the interplay of discourses in a culture at any one time in its history, then what we have in *Ruth* is Gaskell's engagement in such a construction or ideological debate. By entering into this debate Gaskell's words become part of the middle-class deployment of sexuality.

In *Ruth*, as in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell rewrites the path of the fallen woman. If in *Mary Barton*, Mary was redeemed by her ascendancy in terms of class, a course

¹³ Stoneman 114, 115.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 274. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

which at the same time problematized the sexuality of the middle-class woman, in *Ruth*, the heroine achieves redemption by Gaskell's turning the ideology of the feminine ideal on its head - the dichotomy of the madonna and the whore is deconstructed when the fallen woman becomes the saintly mother. Of course, Ruth is merely seduced, and not a prostitute, but nevertheless this possible, indeed expected, role is present in the text. Bellingham's mother blames not her son, but Ruth, whom she perceives in terms of the metaphor of prostitution and disease, as moral pollution taken literally: "this was the girl, then, whose profligacy had led her son astray ... nay, this was the real cause of his illness, his mortal danger at the present time" (85). And when Bellingham/Donne first begins to suspect Ruth's identity, "for the first time for several years, he wondered what had become of her; though, of course, there was but one thing that could have happened, and perhaps it was as well he did not know her end, for most likely it would have made him very uncomfortable" (278). Bradshaw, on discovering Ruth's secret, automatically looks for the outward appearance of the depravity associated with the fallen woman, but could find "no sign of a corrupt mind - no glimpse of boldness and forwardness - no token of want of conscientiousness" (350).¹⁵

If Ruth is the epitome of the feminine ideal, then her purity is no longer a problem, but an expectation. Her essential femininity is stressed through Gaskell's use of the paradigm woman/nature. From the beginning Ruth is associated with the beautiful, the natural, and the innocent. In her workplace she chooses a cold dark place because it allows her to look at the wall opposite on which are panels painted with a profusion of flowers, "so real looking, that you

¹⁵ When Ruth is abandoned she attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself, another indication of the expected fate of the fallen women. See Nead for a discussion of this convention in nineteenth-century art and literature.

could almost fancy you smelt their fragrance" (6).¹⁶ Amongst these flowers are "stately white lilies, sacred to the Virgin". This is the first association of Ruth with the madonna figure she is to become. For Ruth, the flowers "conjured up visions of the other sister-flowers that grew, and blossomed, and withered away in her early home" (7). In her orphaned state she envies the young women at the county ball: "literally and figuratively, there (*sic*) lives seemed to wander through flowery pleasure-paths ... a happy, merry time, when flowers still bloomed, and fires crackled, and comforts and luxuries were piled around them like fairy gifts" (17). Ruth is allied with these women when Bellingham gives her Miss Duncombe's white camellia.¹⁷ Thus Ruth, as a "sister-flower", is associated with both the natural and the domestic.

As one who is truly feminine, Ruth is scarcely aware of her own subjectivity, but is the passive object of the admiration of others. When Jenny tells her she is pretty, her reply that she knows she is is remarked upon by another girl: "'I could not help knowing,' answered [Ruth], simply, 'for many people have told me so'" (12). While their sojourn in Wales is still in its idyllic stage, Bellingham decorates Ruth's hair with water-lilies.¹⁸ Ruth defines herself only in relation to him, and he sees her only as an object of beauty. She knew that he was "pleased" for his manner had "the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy" and she found it "pleasant to forget everything except his pleasure". He invites her to look at herself in the water:

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of the flower imagery and sexuality, see Stoneman 101-103. Stoneman links the flower imagery to the idea of the fallen woman in the common image of the "spoiled-flower", "the faded rose", 102.

¹⁷ In the Victorian language of flowers, the white camellia signified perfected loveliness. Kate Greenaway, *The Language of Flowers* (1884; New York: Avenel Books, n.d.) 11.

¹⁸ Stoneman interprets this scene as showing Ruth's innocent sexuality, because it combines "the red rose of erotic love [Ruth's blush] with the white lily of innocence", recalling Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, 101. The water lily signified purity of heart, Greenaway 43.

She obeyed, and could not help seeing her own loveliness; it gave her a sense of satisfaction for an instant, as the sight of any other beautiful object would have done, but she never thought of associating it with herself. She knew she was beautiful; but that seemed abstract, and removed from herself. Her existence was in feeling, and thinking, and loving. (74)

For Hilary Schor, the novel repeatedly narrates scenes like this, "in which people watch Ruth, and try to tell the story of her sad beauty". She argues that "the novel cannot tell its own central story: it cannot be 'about' sexuality, in that a Victorian novel could not write out a woman's free possession of her own sexual desire; indeed, Ruth is a heroine so naïve she does not recognize her own sexual desire, and spends much of the first half of the novel worrying about the 'pleasures' she feels". While I do not agree that the book cannot be "about" sexuality, in that Gaskell is engaged in redefining women's sexuality by investigating the dangers of the feminine ideal, I would concur with Schor's view that the novel "transforms its heroine in turn into an object lesson".¹⁹ Ruth's innocence is dangerous, and Gaskell, as she had in *Mary Barton* and was to in *North and South*, demonstrates how when innocence is linked to ignorance, a young girl is particularly vulnerable. Ruth is not only seen to have a childlike simplicity, but also to be no better than a child, as when she watched the boy in the river, "as unconscious of any danger as the group of children below" (21). She is regarded by Bellingham as "a beautiful ignoramus" (75). Some of her ignorance is ascribed by Gaskell to her lack of mothering:

She was too young when her mother died to have received any caution or words of advice respecting *the* subject of a woman's life - if, indeed, wise parents ever directly speak of what, in its depth and power, cannot be put into words - which is a brooding spirit with no definite form or shape that men should know it, but which is there, and present before we have recognized and realized its existence. (44, emphasis in original)

¹⁹ Schor 167.

It would seem that Gaskell refers in this passage to women's sexuality, the recognition of desire, as something without words, unspeakable. She continues, "Ruth was innocent and snow-pure. She had heard of falling in love, but did not know the signs and symptoms thereof; nor, indeed, had she troubled her head about them" (44). To fall in love is to be aware of sexual awakening, which should, for the girl educated according to the standards of the feminine ideal, engender a sense of shame, an unhealthy state since it is recognized by its "symptoms". Ruth is like W. R. Greg's fallen woman, who lapsed "in the first instance from a mere exaggeration and perversion of one of the best qualities of a woman's heart". She has yielded from "a weak generosity", and that "strange and sublime unselfishness ... a positive love of self-sacrifice".²⁰ In Greg's construction of women's nature, unselfishness is natural, and selfishness must be taught. Women fall "from motives or feelings in which sensuality and self have no share".²¹ Therefore the education and upbringing of young girls is of paramount importance to defend them against the dictates of the senses, "promptings" which they might experience without recognizing them for what they are.²² As I have already remarked in the chapter on prostitution, Greg's attitude is decidedly contradictory. He denies women an innate sexual desire only to say that extreme care need be taken to keep such a desire from manifesting itself, as it will, as an unnamed illness: "We do not mean to say that uneasiness may not be felt - that health may not sometimes suffer; but there is no consciousness of the cause".²³ Thus the domestic ideal, with its transmuting of feared "unhealthy" sexual desire into a "healthy" desire for motherhood, is a means of controlling women's behaviour. Although she appears to echo Greg,

²⁰ Greg, "Prostitution" 459.

²¹ Greg, "Prostitution" 460.

²² Greg, "Prostitution" 457.

²³ Greg, "Prostitution" 457.

Gaskell's position on this issue is somewhat different. She does not deny the physical desire a woman might feel, although her expression of this view is constrained by "propriety", and appears through metaphor, imagery and other coded language in her works. The illness her heroines suffer is not so much the result of their sexual desire, as a metaphoric expression of the tension they feel in being unable to admit the inadmissible. Their illness is not physically but socially induced.

In *Ruth*, therefore, Gaskell has constructed a woman who follows Greg's model of womanhood, one for whom both her sexual and maternal desire is expressed in "a strange and sublime unselfishness". The problem with Ruth is that she has *no* self. Thus "*the* subject" which she did not hear from her mother could be not only the dangers of sexual desire, but also the need for women to find a balance between selflessness and selfishness, to give to others without risking the loss of self. Indeed, it might be wondered whether Ruth's mother was capable of giving such advice, since she too was orphaned at an early age, and after her marriage, gradually faded from life. She became, in fact, the angelic figure who held the household together at the cost of herself:

Mrs Hilton fell into a delicate state of health, and was unable to bestow the ever-watchful attention to domestic affairs, so requisite in a farmer's wife. Her husband had a series of misfortunes ... which were the consequences (so neighbours said) of Mr Hilton's mistake in marrying a delicate, fine lady. ... While his wife lived, all worldly misfortunes seemed as nothing to him; her strong sense and lively faculty of hope upheld him from despair; her sympathy was always ready, and the invalid's room had an atmosphere of peace and encouragement, which affected all who entered it. (36)

Although she was the spiritual and moral centre to the house, her invalidity for the role she should have assumed, that of farmer's wife, is made literal in her illness.

Alan Shelston criticizes Gaskell for insisting on Ruth's youth, ignorance and lack of mothering. He writes "it is difficult to believe that her workmates would not have enlightened her", although the text shows Ruth generally alone and alienated from her workmates. He also comments on the insistence of Gaskell that the reader must "remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was!" (56) "as if in some way there could be degrees of motherlessness".²⁴ In fact Gaskell does show these degrees, through the number of women who failed to "mother" Ruth - first Ruth's actual mother died, then Jenny, the one workmate who befriended her, left. The old woman still living at Ruth's home might have been a mother. Her husband, suspicious of Bellingham, decides: "I'll put my missis up to going to the town and getting speech of her, and telling her a bit of her danger. An old motherly woman like our Mary will set about it better nor a stupid old fellow like me" (51), but Ruth leaves with Bellingham before this is possible. Mrs Mason, who is *in loco parentis*, also does not concern herself with the moral duties of her young ladies, as the text makes clear: "It would have been a better and more Christian thing, if she had kept up the character of her girls by tender vigilance and maternal care" (54). When she sees Ruth with Bellingham, instead of cautioning her, she berates Ruth with creating a slur on the character of her house. As a result Ruth turned "stony, sick, and pale, as if the lightning had torn the ground beneath her feet"; "so sick and faint", she "staggered", "sank down", and "covered her face with her hands" (55). And yet it is Mrs Mason's anger she reacts to, as she had before when accused of "involuntary failings, of which she had been quite unconscious" (55). There is no indication here that Ruth, although she knows "she had really done wrong", has any idea of the nature of that wrong. When Bellingham takes advantage of her fears, Gaskell stresses again and again Ruth's "natural" femininity. She is weak, powerless and

²⁴ Shelston xiv, xv.

in need of protection. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer argues, "she gives herself up to him because she feels that no other person will take care of her".²⁵

It seemed to her as if it would be happiness enough to be with him; and as for the future, he would arrange and decide that. The future lay wrapped in a golden mist, which she did not care to penetrate; but if he, her sun, was out of sight, the golden mist became dark heavy gloom, through which no hope could come. (56)

She is silent, timid and childlike, languid and simple. And finally she goes to London with Bellingham, because "she was little accustomed to oppose the wishes of anyone - obedient and docile by nature, and unsuspicious and innocent of any harmful consequences" (61).

Patsy Stoneman points out Gaskell's dilemma, indeed her ambivalence, on the question of the education of Ruth about her sexuality and her moral responsibility for herself. She traces how Gaskell establishes two opposing structures for the education of children. There is an authoritarian way of command, obedience and punishment, as in the Bradshaw household where the father dominates, and a non-judgemental, experimental way of teaching "self-dependence", as with Leonard's upbringing in a non-traditional family structure, where all the adults show maternal tendencies. Stoneman sees the inconsistency to lie in Gaskell's attribution of Ruth's "fall" to "a failure of parental vigilance".²⁶ Gaskell, she feels, had "to evade, in this tabooed area, her general assumption that children should judge for themselves". The passage concerning Ruth's lack of advice on "*the* subject of a woman's life" demonstrates, for Stoneman, "how female sexuality, being ideologically 'unspeakable', cannot be brought into consciousness for the daughter, who is therefore unable to take a moral

²⁵ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988) 157.

²⁶ Stoneman 105.

position".²⁷ I would argue that, rather than two moral educational practices, Gaskell shows three. Ruth has had neither the vigilant authoritarian nor the caring guiding manner of parenting. Her moral education has been left to her innate femininity, and Gaskell shows this concept to be lacking, since innocence is based on ignorance. Ruth is "obedient and docile *by nature*" (61, emphasis added), and, "unsuspicious and innocent", she is unable to judge people's actions. She takes Mrs Mason's words as irrevocable, "and that, being so, she was shut out of every house" (55). Even though, early on in their acquaintanceship, she had "wondered why a strange undefined feeling had made her imagine she was doing wrong in walking alongside of one so kind and good as Mr Bellingham" (39), she is unaware of Bellingham's realization that now was a moment to gain his advantage: "Her eyes were so blinded by the fast-falling tears, she did not see (*nor had she seen would she have been able to interpret*) the change in Mr Bellingham's countenance, as he stood silently watching her" (55, emphasis added). Ruth's child-like nature is contrasted with the girl who serves her at the inn: "the young girl (about Ruth's own age, but who was the mistress of the little establishment, owing to her mother's death)" (59). By having little or no moral instruction at all, Ruth is worse off than either the Bradshaw children or her own son. Kept in a state of innocence, left to those impulses which were deemed innate, she is confused, exclaiming, "Oh, what can I do! ... Mr Bellingham, you should help me, and instead of that you only bewilder me" (57). Her state of dis-ease is manifested in her feelings of illness. In this moment of shock, like Molly Gibson whose "brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything", Ruth felt that²⁸

The room whirled round before [her]; it was a dream - a strange, varying, shifting dream - with the old home of her childhood for one scene, with the terror of Mrs Mason's unexpected appearance

²⁷ Stoneman 106.

²⁸ *Wives and Daughters* 418.

for another; and then, strangest, dizziest, happiest of all, there was the consciousness of his love, who was all the world to her. ... Her head ached so much that she could hardly see. (59)

Gaskell is thus exposing the paradox at the heart of arguments like Greg's, that innocence alone is ignorance, ignorance is dangerous, and education is needed to keep a woman in a state of "healthy" innocence.

The nature of maternity and the maternal ideal

Ruth is a novel intensely concerned with the nature of maternity and the maternal ideal. For Gaskell maternal desire is not to be questioned as being of major importance in a woman's life. However, she does probe the implications of the ideal of self-sacrifice. Ruth's motherless state is shown to be unhealthy, and when she is left abandoned and pregnant, motherhood becomes her way to redemption, both through the birth of her own child, and through the maternal qualities of those who befriend her. Thus for Gaskell, maternal feelings are not restricted to those who are literally mothers. Mothers like Mrs Bellingham and Mrs Mason are models not to be imitated. Mrs Mason ignores the welfare of the girls who are in her charge, although as a widow, she "had to struggle for the sake of the six or seven children left dependant on her exertions" (33). Mrs Bellingham is more dangerous for her obsession which is centred on her only son. She is more concerned with power and control than love and guidance:

The unevenness of discipline to which only children are subjected; the thwarting, resulting from over-anxiety; the indiscreet indulgence, arising from a love centred all in one object; had been exaggerated in his education, probably from the circumstance that his mother (his only surviving parent) had been similarly situated to himself. ... [H]er income gave her the means of indulging or controlling him after he had grown to man's estate, as her wayward disposition and her love of power prompted her. (31)

Nevertheless, Ruth's mothering of Leonard, another only son, can also be seen as an obsession, in its own way. Initially, Ruth's role as a mother is marked by contradiction, couched in the opposing terms of depravity and salvation. Faith Benson, on learning of Ruth's pregnant state, represents general opinion and is horrified that there should be a public declaration of Ruth's sexuality. She tells her brother, "there is something so shocking the matter, that I cannot tell you" (117), and "I was just beginning to have a good opinion of her, but I am afraid she is very depraved" (118). At this point Ruth is recovering from an illness that has her lying on the brink of death. Like Mary Barton, she is undergoing a transformation where her illness is a bridge between one state and another. Ruth is to be resocialised, no longer the object of a man's sexual desire, but as the subject of maternal desire, and objectified as the revered mother.

Hemmed in by the proprieties of what could be published, Gaskell passes over Ruth's actual "fall" in silence. "The most glaring gap in *Ruth*", according to Patsy Stoneman, "is the seduction scene itself, but Ruth seems not to have suffered the trauma we might expect". Stoneman argues that Ruth's relaxed behaviour in Wales "leads us to assume that the crucially absent London scene is one of happy, though illicit, sex. This inference, however, could not form part of Elizabeth Gaskell's conscious intention. Unitarians were theologically radical, but could not condone fornication".²⁹ It seems, however, that there might be another explanation for this necessary silence. Not only was Gaskell unable to describe Ruth's sexuality in explicit terms, but also the conception of Leonard, who is to be the source of his mother's salvation, must happen in silence. With daring ambiguity, by means of this silence, Gaskell has the child, whom society would perceive to be the result of sin, conceived remote from any association with sin, and his mother, the fallen woman, transformed into a madonna figure.

²⁹ Stoneman 102. Stoneman goes on to argue that such implications must be repressed by a structure of penitence, through "maternal chastity".

For Thurstan Benson, the voice of Christian forgiveness, "this child's advent" is a matter not of depravity but for rejoicing. He believes that "in the eye of God, [Ruth] is exactly the same as if the life she has led had left no trace behind".

Ruth's "natural" desire to be self-sacrificial, which has already led her to near death in her sexual lapse with the false Bellingham, will be revitalized in terms of motherhood. Ironically Benson perceives Ruth's former life as one of selfishness, rather than another form of selflessness: "Why, it draws her out of herself! If her life has hitherto been self-seeking, and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another" (119). The desire for motherhood is thus constructed as healthy: "the strange, new, delicious prospect of becoming a mother seemed to give her some mysterious source of strength, so that her recovery was rapid and swift from that time" (126).

Ruth's new life is produced within the Christian discourse of sin, repentance and redemption, while, ironically, being predicated upon a lie. This lie, although it carries its own ultimate punishment, is a necessary subterfuge to give Ruth the requisite social acceptance and time to earn her own redemption. However Gaskell also dissolves the difference between the fallen and the married woman. Like Greg, she shows the only difference is in the marriage vow, a social convention, with the consequent problematizing of the "good" woman's sexuality. In her new life, Ruth's "natural" humility and submissiveness are stressed as she learns to fit into the Benson household where she breathes "a purer ether, a diviner air" (141). She is linked both with her own mother, that angel in the house who was "the gentle, blessed mother, who had made her childhood's home holy ground, ... in her very nature so far removed from any of earth's stains and temptations" (141), and the Bensons' forgiving "gentle mother" (135) whose maiden name, Denbigh, she takes in her "widowhood".

At the birth of Leonard, Ruth's sexuality is transmuted into acceptable, almost virginal, purity through motherhood. She is described as "the pale white mother", while outside "the earth was still 'hiding her guilty front with innocent snow'" (160), words Gaskell takes from Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", strengthening the link between Ruth and the madonna figure. Prior to this the household has been strained: "some element of harmony was wanting - some little angel of peace, in loving whom all hearts and natures should be drawn together and their discords hushed" (160). Leonard is to be this "angel of peace" while the other members of the household are all to be, not reproducing the traditional family roles, but in some degree "mothers". Ruth, above all, is the Mother:

It was her own, her darling, her individual baby, already, though not an hour old, separate and sole in her heart, strangely filling up its measure with love and peace, and even hope. For here was a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life, which she fondly imagined, in that early passion of maternal love, she could guard from every touch of corrupting sin by ever watchful and most tender care. And *her* mother had thought the same, most probably; and thousands of others think the same, and pray to God to purify and cleanse their souls, that they may be fit guardians for their little children. Oh, how Ruth prayed, even while she was yet too weak to speak; and how she felt the beauty and significance of the words, "Our Father!" (161, emphasis in original)

For the modern reader the "significance of the words, 'Our Father!'" serves as a reminder that the ideology of self-abnegating motherhood was constructed as a patriarchal discourse, within the symbolic order of language. Nevertheless, in her engagement with this discourse, Gaskell manages to subvert and refashion it in a number of ways. Firstly she destabilizes the certainty of the ideology. Ruth's thought that she can safeguard Leonard is qualified by the adverb "fondly", indicating both her love and the foolishness of such an imagining. The "truth" that all mothers think the same is similarly undermined by the phrase "most probably", which establishes an element of

doubt. Gaskell also literalizes the dangers inherent in the metaphor of self-sacrifice, and as well, creates characters who show that maternal feelings are not restricted by gender or to those who are biological mothers. The birth of Leonard transforms the Benson household, not only because he is an "angel of peace", but also because he brings out the maternal in the other members of the household. He is not to feel "the want of a father" (161). Indeed, Gaskell shows fathers, apart from the transcendental but absent heavenly Father, in a negative light. Mr Bradshaw is an authoritarian bully, and, in Ruth's new state, she begins to see Bellingham's behaviour with "a new significance". She now doubts whether he can be trusted, and "with her desire of heaven for her child", contrasts Leonard's two "real" but "absent" fathers:

Slight speeches, telling of a selfish, worldly nature, unnoticed at the time, ... told of a low standard, of impatient self-indulgence, of no acknowledgement of things spiritual and heavenly. Even while this examination was forced upon her, by the new spirit of maternity that had entered into her, and made her child's welfare supreme, she hated and reproached herself for the necessity there seemed upon her of examining and judging the absent father of her child. (162)

"The new spirit of maternity" that Ruth feels is her old desire to think of others and not herself refocussed on her son. But it is a spirit that is not confined to Ruth. The other three adults in the household are also able to show maternal feelings. However, for all that she wishes to show alternative forms of mothering, Gaskell never questions the belief that maternal feelings are innate in women. For Faith, the new baby's touch "called out her love; the doors of her heart were thrown open wide for the little infant to go in and take possession" (162). Despite "her excellent practical sense" which "perhaps, made her a more masculine character than her brother" (205), Faith's "warm instincts" were intended by "Nature"

to find vent in a mother's duties; her heart yearned after children, and made her restless in her childless state, without her well knowing why; but now, the delight she experienced in tending, nursing, and contriving for the little boy - even contriving to the point of sacrificing many of her cherished whims - made her happy and satisfied and peaceful. (196)

Nevertheless, Faith's balance of masculine and feminine traits makes her love less obsessive than Ruth's. She and Sally, despite their chances to marry, have both chosen alternative roles to marriage and motherhood, and although they carry out their "natural" womanly role by caring for Thurstan, they are strong and undiminished. Mrs Bradshaw, on the other hand, is reduced by her wifehood. On the surface she appears as the model wife: "she was an obedient, unremonstrating wife to him; no stronger affection had ever brought her duty to him into conflict with any desire of her heart" (232); but she is an example of a poor mother, one who, in fear of her husband, puts his desires even before those of her children, who suffer as a result. Sally's story of her own courtship juxtaposes the humour of her experience and the romance of Barbary Allen, and shows the strength of not marrying, and that people do not die of love, but go and marry someone else. Thurstan, too, exhibits feminine traits of character. He "derived so much of his character" from his "gentle mother" (135), and has been feminized by his illness and suffering. Ruth first noticed:

the mild beauty of the face, though there was something in the countenance which told of the body's deformity, something more and beyond the pallor of habitual ill health, something of a quick spiritual light in the deep set eyes, a sensibility about the mouth. (68)

Thus Gaskell sets up the family of the Bensons, Sally, Ruth and Leonard against the conventional Bradshaws, and the dissolute Bellinghams. The lives of the women are all alternatives to Ruth's chosen path, that is, alternatives to complete self-abnegation and death. Motherhood is redefined as a positive

healthy social force, on new terms, to be found in women and men alike, where there is a balance struck. It is not to be found in the extremes of the selfish power seeking of Mrs Bellingham, the dutiful nihilism of Mrs Bradshaw, and the selfless abnegation of Ruth Denbigh. The model wife and mother in the novel is Jemima. She changes from a wilful selfish girl rebelling against her strict upbringing, who initially regards Ruth's secret "with shrinking, shuddering recoil" (324) and her sexuality as "some strange, ghastly, lidless monster" (323), to a compassionate woman, comfortable in her love of husband and child. At the end of the novel she represents the balance which endures in life, in contrast to Ruth's progress to death:

First of all Mrs Farquhar appeared. She looked very different from the Jemima Bradshaw of three years ago. Happiness had called out beauty; the colouring of her face was lovely, and vivid as that of an autumn day; her berry-red lips scarce closed over the short white teeth for her smiles; and her large dark eyes glowed and sparkled with daily happiness. (431)

Ruth and the conflict of desire: the choice between body and soul

Ruth's lack of concern with her "self", her wish to live for her son and her concern for her own penitence and his salvation, lead her to her death. For Gaskell, the model of motherly self-sacrifice must be moderated. Ruth never learns discrimination: "it was one of the *faults* in her nature to be ready to make *any sacrifices* for those who loved her, and to value affection almost above its price" (248, emphases added). In her search for spiritual purity and redemption, Ruth forgets her body, that silenced sexuality which manifested itself in her desire to be everything to Bellingham. In her desire to be the angel that Leonard dreams her to be, with her "large, soft, white-feathered wings" (258), she must choose between two conflicting desires and the two men in her life - the selflessness of giving her all, physically, to Bellingham/Donne or the selflessness

of giving her all, spiritually, to Leonard. The conflict manifests itself as illness, a physical dis-ease which reaches nightmare proportions. If, as Acton wrote, the prostitute, that is the sexual woman, was "a woman with half the woman gone", then, as I have already argued, the angel in the house is also only "half" a woman.³⁰ Ruth, in aspiring to be the angel, the madonna not the magdalen, must silence her physical desires. Stoneman writes that in *Ruth*, "sexuality appears as sickness" and takes up the conventional metaphor of sexual desire and contagion.³¹ I would see Gaskell appropriating the sickness metaphor from the discourse on prostitution, and refashioning it in a more literal way. When Ruth recognizes Bellingham, now Donne, on the beach, she is faced with internal conflict as she realizes that, despite her knowledge of his weak selfish character, she still loves him, a love which is vividly expressed in physical terms:

The figures near her vanished into strange nothingness; the sounds of their voices were as distant sounds in a dream, while the echo of one voice thrilled through and through. She could have caught at his arm for support, in the awful dizziness which wrapped her up, *body and soul*. (268, emphasis added)

She feels "a strange, sick, shrinking yearning", and "her heart felt at times like ice, at times like burning fire; always a heavy, heavy weight within her" (271). Even his absence affects her physically: "she felt, rather than saw, that he was not there. ... [she] felt as if that moment was like death. She had a kind of desire to make some sharp sound, to relieve a choking sensation, but it was over in an instant, and she sat on very composed and silent - to all outward appearance, the very model of a governess who knew her place" (276). The division in her self is thus expressed in the difference between her outer appearance and her inner turmoil, a silencing of her desires where she alternates between strength and weakness. From appearing to be "the very model of a

³⁰ Acton, *Prostitution* 166.

³¹ Stoneman 114.

governess" she gains "a strange exultant power over herself" and feels "strangely at ease in her sense of power" (276). With the girls, "she was reading to them - with how sick and trembling a heart, no words can tell. But she could master and keep down outward signs of her emotion" (288). The strength she feels is a sign of her growth from an innocent obedient young girl, to a morally aware mother. But nevertheless, the strength comes at a cost:

She must show no sign of weakness. But, oh! the relief, after that walk, to sit in her own room, locked up ... and to let her weary frame (weary with being so long braced up to rigidity and stiff quiet) fall into a chair anyhow - all helpless, nerveless, motionless, *as if the very bones had melted out of her!* (285, emphasis added)

After she declines Donne's offer of marriage:

she clambered on, almost stunned by the rapid beating of her heart. Her eyes were hot and dry; and at last became as if she were blind. ... As Ruth's limbs fell, so they lay. *She had no strength, no power of volition to move a finger.* She could not think or remember. She was literally stunned. The first sharp sensation which roused her from her torpor was a quick desire to see him once more. (304, emphasis added)

And finally, "she turned sick and faint whenever Mr Donne's name was casually mentioned. No one saw it; but she felt the miserable stop in her heart's beating, and wished that she could prevent it by any exercise of self-command" (313).

The strength she shows is not ultimately for her self, which disintegrates as she denies her physical desire, but a protection for her son. She may feel tormented by her love of Donne, but her love for Leonard gives her greater strength. Nevertheless, when she finally tells Leonard the truth about his birth, the same metaphor of illness and physical pain is employed. Her greatest sacrifice is to give up her good name, the outer sign of her identity, in telling the truth to her son, before he hears the story from others:

At last she tried to speak; she tried with strong bodily effort, almost amounting to convulsion. But the words would not come; it was not till she saw the absolute terror depicted on his face that she found utterance; and then the sight of that terror changed the words from what she meant them to have been. ... "Why do you look so wild and ill? ... Dearest mother, are you ill?" (342)

After her confession, "she grew so faint that her hold of him relaxed. ... When she partially recovered, he helped her to the bed, on which she lay still, wan and deathlike" (345).

From this point in the novel Ruth works for earthly redemption and spiritual salvation. Her goodness becomes even more marked as she no longer lives under the cover of a lie. Her sense of self fades as she becomes more and more the angel figure. Working among the poor and diseased, she overcomes her revulsion by separating soul from body, both her own and those of the patients she attended: "in thinking of the individuals themselves, as separate from their decaying frames" she "thought of her charge and not of herself" (390). She no longer seems to need earthly material things. Any money she earns "she took simply and without comment: for she felt that it was not hers to refuse; that it was, in fact, owing to the Bensons for her and her child's subsistence. ... But it was astonishing how much she was able to do without money" (391). In fact she reaches the point where she scarcely has need of words, and those she does speak are not her own or of herself, but the message of God:

Her ways were very quiet; she never spoke much. ... And yet Ruth's silence was not like reserve; it was too gentle and tender for that. It had more the effect of a hush of all loud or disturbing emotions, and out of the deep calm the words that came forth had a beautiful power. She did not talk much about religion; but those who noticed her knew that it was the unseen banner which she was following. The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God. (391)

As an exemplar of a patriarchal ideological ideal, she has become a vehicle for the transmission of that ideology.

This "bearing the word" can be placed in the context of Margaret Homans' hypothesis, as one of the ways in which women writers "literalize" the exclusion of women from language and the problematic relationship between women, language and the symbolic order. For Homans:

In a literary culture dominated by the symbolic order and its values, the word that women writers and their female characters most often bear is the word of their own exclusion from linguistic practice, even if they take up this bearing in the (unconscious) hope of bearing their inclusion in another linguistic practice. In carrying language from the relatively figurative to the relatively literal in these various ways that are connected to the thematics of female experience, the women writers and their women characters dramatize at once the way in which the relation of women as women to symbolic language is continually in jeopardy and the hope that the father's law might cease to be the exclusive language of literary culture.³²

Such a hypothesis is also useful to combat criticism of the novel's excessive religiosity.³³ The use of the Bible in *Ruth* is both strategic and subversive. In dealing with a subject "unfit" for fiction Gaskell had to make sure that not only did she keep within the proprieties, as a woman speaking in public on such a subject, but also she had an accepting reading audience. *Ruth* is a novel full of Biblical allusion, as Michael Wheeler has shown.³⁴ More importantly, it is the

³² Homans 33.

³³ See, for example, Shelston xix: "Furthermore the whole story is coloured by its author's overt and often embarrassing religiosity, and these limitations are never more in evidence than in the concluding pages, where Mrs Gaskell contrives martyrdom for a heroine who has at least earned the right to be accepted amongst the living rather than glorified with the dead", and Gérin 130, "the deep religiosity of its tone is too emphatic for modern taste".

³⁴ Michael D. Wheeler, "The Sinner as Heroine: A Study of Mrs Gaskell's *Ruth* and the Bible", *Durham University Journal* 37 (1975-76): 148-61. See also, Stoneman 111-113.

only Gaskell novel to make such an overt use of the Bible.³⁵ Firstly, Gaskell rewrites the parable of the prodigal son in terms of the erring daughter, echoing Greg's call for understanding and the exposure of the double standard within Victorian society. Secondly, the Christian framework of sin, repentance and salvation strongly structures the novel. But beyond this, by cloaking her story in the authority of "the law of the Father", with its religious and moral code, Gaskell could gain more acceptance and less condemnation for her heroine than if she wrote of a young woman who was redeemed by the strength of her own will. The book ends, not with Ruth's death, but with a testament to an authority, the Bible. The use of the Christian religion can therefore give this view of the life of a fallen woman a claim to that "truth" that is believed to be the highest moral arbiter. There can be no argument with this story, because it is authorized by God's word. It even overcomes the most hardened opponents of *Ruth*. Bradshaw, the representative foreshadowing of the book's critics on publication, those men who burned the novel to protect their families, meets his own redemption in the recognition of Leonard in the last lines:

Mr Bradshaw had been anxious to do something to testify his respect for the woman, who, if all had entertained his opinions, would have been driven into sin. ... For the first time, for years, that he had entered Mr Benson's house, he came leading and comforting her son - and, for a moment, he could not speak to his old friend, for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears. (458)

However it would seem that the use of biblical material is not only ambiguous, but also subverted from within the novel itself. The Bible has

³⁵ This is not to deny that Gaskell was writing as a Christian, or to say that other novels did not make use of Biblical allusion, such as the story of Dives and Lazarus in *Mary Barton*. Hilary Schor argues that in *Ruth* Gaskell has created "her own female passion play, one worked out in more specifically Christological terms than have been noted, and one which portrays as well the female artist attempting to choose between literary languages and authorial relationships to her text; she is examining the connection between sexual and poetic uses of the female", 158-9.

always been a rich source of contradictory statements, as Gaskell shows. When Leonard is a small boy he is to be whipped for telling a lie, until Sally intervenes. The result is a clash of conflicting texts, when Sally outquotes her master to gain Leonard's remittance:

"Sally! remember where it is said, 'He that spareth the rod, spoileth the child,'" said Mr Benson austerely.
 "Aye, I remember; and I remembered a bit more than you want me to remember, I reckon. It were King Solomon as spoke them words, and it were King Solomon's son that were King Rehoboam, and no great shakes either. I can remember what is said on him, 2 Chronicles, xii. chapter, 14th verse: 'And he,' that's King Rehoboam, the lad that tasted the rod, 'did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord.' I've not been reading my chapter every night for fifty year to be caught napping by a Dissenter, neither!" said she, triumphantly. "Come along, Leonard." (203-4)

Sally's triumph in using alternative texts serves to unsettle the seemingly unified structure of the biblical framework to the story, which it leaves open to question and to other interpretations, once placed in a different context. The use of the Bible, therefore, can be seen as a textual strategy to give credence and authority to Ruth's contrary path, and Gaskell's own rewriting of the harlot's progress as the dangerous apotheosis of the feminine ideal of maternity.

Gaskell, by constructing Ruth as the idealized angel in the house, as part of a patriarchal ideology which exalts self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, and maternal perfection, takes the ideal to its literal conclusion. Since she no longer has any self, Ruth is effectively banished from the symbolic order. The price on earth is madness, a retreat to a pre-symbolic stage, and then death. Stoneman points out that "of all the critics who have written of Ruth's 'unnecessary' death, not one has noticed that she dies insane".³⁶ She, too, posits that Ruth has returned to a "pre-moral world" in her insanity. For Stoneman this arises out of the novel's

³⁶ Stoneman 116.

"unintended ideological *impasse*".³⁷ Ruth returns to nurse Donne because "she was led, while childishly irresponsible, into a sexual bond which she can now neither forget nor responsibly continue", and commits suicide by choosing to allow "the sexual bond to come into consciousness".³⁸ For Stoneman the contradiction lies in the fact that Ruth's awareness of her own sexuality prevents her from seeing herself as virtuous, but at the same time her inability to accept it makes her unwilling to be "sinful".³⁹ The result is madness and Ruth "could not remember who she was" (444).

However, there is another possible reading of this loss of memory. In her return to nurse her former lover, Ruth is merely carrying further the selflessness that she has shown throughout the novel. Although she is now older and able to make informed choices, no longer merely "obedient and docile" (61), her choice to go to him echoes her actions in his earlier illness, when, "though it would have been an infinite delight to her to hover and brood around him, yet it was of him she thought and not of herself" (86), she obeyed his mother and stayed away. Now she can reconcile the two loves of her life. She begs the doctor to allow her to go to Donne, not because he was once her lover, but because "he is Leonard's father!" (441). She therefore cannot remember who she was because she has negated herself and her death is a suicide, a sacrificing of self. For Ruth death is not a defeat or punishment, but a logical conclusion to her role in life:

"It is over!" said he. "She is dead!"
 Outrang through the room the cry of Leonard:
 "Mother! mother! mother! You have not left me alone! you will
 not leave me alone! you are not dead! Mother! Mother!"
 They had pent in his agony of apprehension till then, that no wail
 of her child might disturb her ineffable calm. But now there was a

³⁷ Stoneman 117.

³⁸ Stoneman 115.

³⁹ Stoneman 116.

cry heard through the house, of one refusing to be comforted:

"Mother! Mother!"

But Ruth lay dead. (449, emphases added)

The death of Ruth, the mother, is her assumption, her apotheosis, when, cleared of the stigma of the fallen woman, she is recognized as a madonna figure, and becomes, literally, an angel.

Chapter 7

Margaret Hale: a question of balance

"You shall come with me if you like; but no one can please me but myself."

Margaret Hale, in *North and South*

He dreamt of her; he dreamt she came dancing towards him with outspread arms, and with a lightness and gaiety which made him loathe her, even while it allured him.

John Thornton, in *North and South*

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, a key question is one concerning "balance". How does a woman mediate between the public and the private, between voice and silence, self and self-abnegation, those realms which, within the ideological constructs of the mid-nineteenth century, are designated so rigidly masculine and feminine: in *North and South* Margaret Hale must learn "that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it" and "to settle that most difficult problem for woman, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set aside for freedom in working".¹ The process by which she learns is one involving illness. As in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, Gaskell examines the equation of femininity and illness to show how dangerous the ideal can be for a woman, both as the linking of sexuality and illness, and as the metaphor of self-sacrifice.

Women, workers and the meaning of silence

¹ Gaskell, *North and South* 405. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

In the chapter "Masters and Men", Mr Hale and Thornton discuss labour relations in Milton Northern. Both see the relationship between the industrialists and their workers in terms of a paternalistic, patriarchal structure. Thornton believes in a benign autocracy, since, he argues, "in our infancy we require a wise despotism to govern us. Indeed, long past infancy, children and young people are the happiest under the unfailing laws of a discreet, firm authority" (114). For Mr Hale, the masters had a duty to educate their workers, for the masses appeared to be "already passing rapidly into the troublesome stage which intervenes between childhood and manhood, in the life of the multitude as well as that of the individual". He sees the need for "a wise parent" who realises the desire for independent action on the part of the child, and thus becomes his "friend and adviser when his absolute rule shall cease" (115). In both cases the worker is constructed in terms of a child, either infant or adolescent. Margaret objects to Thornton's argument because it makes an unnecessary barrier between the public and the private lives of the workers, since his *laissez-faire* philosophy allows his "despotism" to apply only to working hours. She breaks down the differences between the domestic and the public spheres and sees the relationship not in terms of the cash nexus but that of interdependent lives:

not in the least because of your labour and capital positions, whatever they are, but because you are a man, dealing with a set of men over whom you have, whether you reject the use of it or not, immense power, just because your lives and your welfare are so constantly and intimately interwoven. God has made us that we must be mutually dependent. (116)

As Catherine Gallagher points out, the issues in *North and South* "are integrated by Margaret's insistence on applying a single ethical standard to questions of both public and private behaviour".²

Because she includes all parts of their lives in her view of the world, and does not differentiate between private and public behaviour, Margaret's argument focuses attention on the silenced and suppressed party in this discussion - women. Already in the novel we have been made aware of how actions which concern the men at large have repercussions for the women at home, whether working or middle-class. Forced by her father's decision to live in Milton Northern, Margaret finds that "the domestic worries pressed so very closely, and in so new and sordid a form, *upon all the women in the family*, that there was good reason to fear her mother's health might be becoming seriously affected" (82; emphasis added). Bessy has to continue working for her family after her mother dies, even though she is ill, as she tells Margaret: "Mary's schooling were to be kept up, mother said, and father he were always liking to buy books, and go to lectures o' one kind or another - all which took money - so I just worked on till I shall ne'er get the whirr out o' my ears, or the fluff out o' my throat i' this world. That's all" (97).

Perception and experience, then, are shown to be gendered. When he first arrives in Milton Northern, Mr Hale is impressed by the new industrialism. He admires the "power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton", and is overawed by "the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease". He does not question this, although he has questioned the more familiar traditional world of his religious beliefs. Margaret, however, who "went less abroad, among machinery and men", holds an essentially domestic view, a

² Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1985) 171.

feminine perception of the same industrialism and its effects. It is women who are on the cutting edge of class definition, since they are the ones who deal with the individuals rather than the masses. Margaret's excursions take her amongst the working people, and her acquaintance with Bessie makes her aware of "those, who, in all measures affecting masses of people, must be acute sufferers for the good of many" (64). Such experiences lead her to question the Benthamite utilitarian philosophies she sees in action around her, and to look for some underlying humanity. Milton Northern becomes brighter for her when she has "found a human interest" (69).

Margaret's observations allow Gaskell to present the contrast of power and powerlessness not only in terms of class but also of gender. Margaret sees the individuals, the personal, because that is given as female experience, while Mr Hale sees the greater public whole, just as his reflections on greater wholes has allowed him to doubt and act on his principles, and to cause suffering to the powerless in his family - his wife and daughter. Rosemary Bodenheimer writes of Higgins that in his relationship with Margaret and Thornton, "his assumption of personal equality simply overrides the structure of hierarchy and deference implicit in paternalism".³ The same might be said of Margaret in issues of gender, where, for her, the implicit assumption concerns behaviour according to the ideal of femininity and the separate spheres for the sexes. She can be humble and retiring, but not necessarily deferential; she assumes her own equal worth.

Thus the arguments presented by the three characters in "Masters and Men", can also be read in terms of gender, as much as class, for similar paradigms are at work in each.⁴ In terms of Victorian ideology, the comparison of workers with

³ Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story* 58.

⁴ Most critical analysis of this particular chapter has dealt with only the subject of class and labour relations.

children was also applied to women. The ideal of femininity was constructed around the paradox that, while being granted the domestic autonomy of Ruskin's queens, women could only be men's spiritual guides because of their innocence. They were confined to the domestic sphere because they were weak and needed protection. As Ruskin wrote, constructing the ideal of masculinity and femininity on opposing qualities:

each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike. ... The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. ... But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of the contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial: ... often he must be wounded or subdued; often misled; and *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. ... And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her.⁵

But although seeming to have reached adulthood, this state was based on the retention of childlike qualities, as the expression of femininity. It is against such an ideal of femininity that Margaret must measure herself and form her identity.

In "The Angel in the House" Coventry Patmore also compared masculine and feminine qualities in the characters of the two lovers, and, as with Ruskin, these qualities are constructed around binary oppositions. The attraction of the woman lies in her innocence. Where the man questions and doubts, she has simple faith; even when he lives a good life:

⁵ Ruskin 87, emphasis in original.

... his virtuous deeds
 Lack beauty, virtue's badge; she fails
 More graciously than he succeeds.
 (Canto V, Preludes, I, ll.6-8)⁶

Unlike the man, the woman shows neither pride, nor despair; she does not seek fame; and while lacking "the patient brain / To track shy truth":

... Her facile wit
 At that which he hunts down with pain
 Flies straight, and does exactly hit.
 (ll.25-28)

A woman's life is based on "happy virtues" which "make an Eden in her breast", whereas his virtues "disjointed and at strife", do not bring him rest (ll.39-44). Most significant in Patmore's construction, however, is the way in which these qualities are natural to woman. Somehow, although innocent, she does not seem to be ignorant, but is aware through some innate wisdom, by virtue of being a woman. The "Eden in her breast" which through implication can bring the rest that the man desires and cannot achieve for himself, is a prelapsarian, non-sexual bliss. Her value lies in her childlike state:

He's never young nor ripe; she grows
 More infantine, auroral, mild,
 And still the more she lives and knows
 The lovelier she's express'd a child.
 (ll.17-20)

Yet in the midst of this seeming innocence, there is an ambivalence towards her supposedly non-existent sexuality. If the masculine and feminine qualities are

⁶ Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House", Book I, "The Betrothal", Canto V, "The Violets: Preludes, I, *The Comparison*", *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*, ed. Frederick Page (1854; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1949) 89-90.

strictly opposite, then the implication is that, unlike the man, she is always young, and always ripe - for what? The word sits uneasily beside the declarations of her "infantine" charms.

In *North and South* Gaskell exposes the fallacy inherent in the paradigm of worker/woman/child. In the middle of the discussion between Mr Hale and Thornton Margaret interrupts with a story which could be read as an exemplum for class and gender alike. She tells how "in Nuremberg only three or four years ago", a young man was brought up by his father in complete isolation and kept in a state of childhood "to save him from temptation and error". On his father's death, the forty year old son was found, "an over grown man, with the unexercised intellect of a child". But when the man entered society, he fell prey to "every bad counsellor" since he did not know good from evil. "He could not even use words effectively enough to be a successful beggar", and after fourteen months the city authorities had to take him in to save him from starvation. Margaret comments: "His father had made the blunder of bringing him up in ignorance and taking it for innocence" (115). In terms of gender, this can be likened to keeping a woman a child in mistakenly preserving her innocence, and denying her the right to participate within society as a moral and thinking, articulate being. The infant is the being without voice, one who has not yet entered the symbolic realm of language, the realm of the Father, of masculine paternal authority. For Gaskell, as she had already shown in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*, the state of presumed innocence also raises problems for women as sexual beings, a point that will be developed later in this chapter.

If the workers are compared with children, so too at another point are invalids. The comparison brings yet another element to the paradigm and links the invalid to the worker and both to femininity: "But the monotonous life led by invalids often makes them like children, inasmuch as they have neither of

them any sense of proportion in events, and seem each to believe that the walls and curtains which shut in their world, and shut out everything else, must of necessity be larger than anything hidden beyond" (141). The world of the sickroom is the world of women, the domestic sphere, cramped behind curtains and walls, narrow and confining, without a broader view. Margaret strives to move beyond this and understand what is on the outside. The workers too are accused of having a limited viewpoint. Thornton rails against the unions: "It is too bad to find out that fools - ignorant, wayward men like these - just by uniting their weak and silly heads, are to rule over the fortunes of those who bring all the wisdom that knowledge and experience, and often painful thought and anxiety, can give" (139). The workers, then, are "wayward" like children, or "weak and silly" like women and their understanding is too narrow. Thus the terms are almost interchangeable. Women, children, workers, all are invalid in their view because it is not the broad public far-reaching view of the middle-class men. The result of this logic is that they must be protected under the paternalistic and patriarchal order.⁷ In this novel, class and gender, industrial and sexual relations overlap, and cannot easily be separated.

At the centre of these intersecting axes of class and gender are the figures of Margaret Hale and John Thornton, who bring together and represent opposing forces: male and female, north and south, the new industrialism and the old rural gentry, the public and the domestic spheres. Both are a focus of change; both must learn the value of balance; and both must question and transform the ideologies that they have accepted as truths. The balance can only be achieved by an integration of the seeming oppositions.

⁷ The extent to which this protection should be taken varies. Thornton will protect Fanny but not his workers, for instance. However during the course of the novel, with Mr. Hale's and Margaret's influence, he learns to see the workers in more individual terms and to break down the barriers between their lives at work and at home, just as he learns to accept Margaret's more public role.

Margaret, men, and masculinity

Margaret is a young woman associated with strength and power. She is no model of "femininity" like her cousin Edith, that "soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls" (1). She is described in terms of those who rule: "stately", "an empress", an "Egyptian statue", "a queen" (5, 56, 265, 416). However, the implications of this metaphor are problematic for Margaret. Those who rule belong within the symbolic order, the realm of language and of law. The ideology of the separate spheres was a patriarchal construct which allowed to women another, but secondary, order: not "invention or creation" but the "arrangement and decision" of Ruskin's queens. In such an ideology, the feminine is marginalized by being constructed within the masculine order. "They are in nothing alike" is paradoxically both a statement and a negation of difference. In the Ruskinian world, the feminine woman does not represent disorder and disarray but is an orderer of the private sphere, a tamer of the wilderness: "the stars may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is".⁸ For Margaret, who attempts to live by the ideology of perfect womanhood, anything that seeks to disrupt her sense of order and her self-control, such as her unconscious desires, proves a source of disorder, dis-ease, and illness.

From the beginning Margaret is given aspects of "masculine" behaviour as she strides forth through "her forest", "crushing down the fern with a cruel glee, as she felt it yield under her light foot" (13). She is associated with the natural, the open and the unrestricted, rather than the domestic sphere, and her sensual

⁸ Ruskin 88.

nature delights in the physical world around her: "her out-of-doors life was perfect. Her indoors life had its drawbacks" (13);

she was so happy out of doors, at her father's side, that she almost danced; and with the soft violence of the west wind behind her, as she crossed some heath, she seemed borne onwards, as light and as easily as the fallen leaf that was wafted along by the autumn breeze. But the evenings were rather difficult to fill up agreeably. Immediately after tea her father withdrew into his small library, and she and her mother were left alone. (15)

Margaret is associated in character with three men in the novel: Frederick, Thornton, and her father. In appearance she is "more like [her father] than her mother", and not ideally feminine, being "so far from regularly beautiful" (12). On the other hand, Mr Hale does not fit neatly into the gendered stereotype of the masculine. His face shows "every fluctuating emotion" in its "soft and waving" lines, while his eyes have "a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine" (74). His university friends "took him to their hearts, with something of the protecting kindness they would have shown a woman" (331), and Higgins remembers him as "th' oud parson" who "would ha' fretted his woman's heart out" (410). Mr Hale is also contrasted with the ruggedly masculine Thornton with his "tall massive frame", and eyes which seem "intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in his face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble". Thornton has "the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything". Margaret is aware of the difference between the two men: "the opposition of character ... seemed to explain the attraction they evidently felt towards each other" (75).

However, if resolution is a masculine quality, it is shared by Thornton and Margaret alike. From the beginning there are indications that Margaret is not submissive, or passive, to male demands: "Her mouth was wide; no rosebud that

could only open just enough to let out a 'yes' and 'no' and 'an't please you, sir'", and there are implications of sensuality and passion: "But the wide mouth was one soft curve of rich red lips". But there are also signs of self-control in an expression that is to bring her trouble since it is easily misread: "the look on her face was, in general, too dignified and reserved for one so young" (13). Here from the start, is a warning that she still has much to learn, that her pride, especially in self-denial, will have to be tempered: "her keen enjoyment of every sensuous pleasure was balanced finely, *if not overbalanced*, by her conscious pride in being able to do without them all, if need were" (14; emphasis added).

Margaret is still young and naïve when she arrives in Milton Northern, but has already had to face her own sexual attractiveness to men. After Henry Lennox proposes she recoils from the thought of her own sexuality and "felt guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman as to be thought of in marriage" (28). In her dealings with Thornton she is as unaware as the reader is made aware of the way in which he sees her in terms of her physicality. In their early encounters the scene is seldom seen through Margaret's consciousness, unlike most of the rest of the novel. These meetings are usually portrayed through Thornton's reaction to her, his attraction to her physical presence, his repulsion at her manner, and his own self-awareness about his own body. On their first meeting, "her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure" (58). He is attracted by her, yet her manner daunts him, because she does not behave in the way young Milton Northern ladies are supposed to behave. She is "a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing" (56), and he is disconcerted by "her eyes, with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom" (58). He misreads her from the beginning: "her quiet coldness of demeanour he interpreted into contemptuousness"; and he becomes aware he is "a great rough fellow, with not a grace or a refinement about him ... he felt more awkward and

self-conscious in every limb than he had ever done in all his life before" (58).

Again, at a later meeting, he watches her, with an observation that is marked by its subdued eroticism:

She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink in it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the replacing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently until it tightened around her soft flesh; and then the loosening - the fall. He could almost have exclaimed - "There it goes again!" There was so little to be done after he arrived at the preparation for tea, that he was almost sorry the obligation of eating and drinking came so soon to prevent his watching Margaret. (74)

He envies her father "who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar tongs". Yet Thornton's perception is coloured by his acceptance of the ideology of femininity, the ideology which makes it so hard for him to understand her "passionate" and vehement behaviour (76). Margaret's hands are not merely ornamental, but strong and useful. Without the help of extra servants she has spent the day ironing and scouring, and she describes herself as "Peggy the laundry-maid" not "Margaret Hale the lady" (70).⁹

Margaret's reaction to Thornton, on the other hand, is usually in terms of abstracts - she dislikes what he represents, as she dislikes his ideas, and his value system - and above all she sees him in terms of power. Nevertheless, there is the hint that she is not unaware of his physical presence. After that first encounter she tells her mother he was "tall, broadshouldered ... with a face that is neither

⁹ Thornton is not the only man to see Margaret in such terms: The men in the street, the doctor and the constable all react to her physical presence (66, 121, 263).

exactly plain, nor yet handsome ... not quite a gentleman ... with such an expression of resolution and power ... he looks very inflexible" (102). In fact, Margaret's perceptions of Thornton's character mirror his perceptions of her. By the end of the novel, she is impressed by "his fine figure", "distinguished appearance", "noble composure" and "sense of inherent dignity and manly strength" (417). However, for the most part, because during their meetings the consciousness of what is happening changes from Margaret's to that of Thornton, the text is curiously silent on her immediate reactions to him, and these are usually seen filtered through afterthought or comments to her parents. It is as if the text, like Margaret herself, is hiding this knowledge, disguising her own feelings, until they break through the surface and she is forced to face them, and by this time the situation has become more complicated through her exposure to the public gaze. Equally, Gaskell, the woman writer, is able to go beyond the bounds of what is properly a feminine subject matter and describe the physical attraction of a woman, and a man's desire, by having that description mediated through a male character.

The third man who shares characteristics with Margaret is her brother Frederick. This is, of course, natural since he is her brother, but nevertheless, Gaskell uses the similarity to expose the way in which the ideology of the two spheres colours the perception and reading of men's and women's behaviour. Frederick, Margaret and their father all make a stand on principle, act according to their belief in justice and reason, and must suffer the consequences. However, in the case of Mr Hale and Frederick, although in their differing ways they become social outcasts, exiled from the church and a familiar way of life for one, and from his country and family for the other, their courses of action, though disapproved of by many, are at least respected. Margaret is misunderstood, since she steps outside of the accepted role for women. When Frederick secretly returns, we are made aware of how completely alone Margaret has been. She has

no one to talk to, forced by circumstances and propriety to be silent. She has nursed her dying mother, hiding her ambivalent emotions about the privileged position of Dixon, and her mother's obvious favouring of Frederick; she has mothered her father, who is incapable of coming to terms with his wife's illness; she has put her brother in danger by asking him to return to England. She has no extended family. Her nearest relations are overseas, and even they have been shown as incapable of understanding Margaret's deep and silent passions. And for herself, she is suffering the aftermath of her actions at the riot, and the subsequent proposal from Thornton and her shameful feelings about her sexuality. When Frederick arrives, she immediately perceives an ally, one who would understand. A brother could be an intimate in a way that the sexual politics of the separate spheres did not allow between unrelated men and women. He is both of the domestic and familial, as well as the public, arena. But Frederick is more than the friend and brother who shares the burden of their mother's death, and recognizes a common experience and understanding of their family and childhood. He is a mirror of Margaret herself, yet unrestrained by the ideology of femininity.¹⁰

The similarity between the two was noted by Dixon, the family servant who had known them both since birth. When Margaret admonishes Dixon for disparaging Mr Hale's decision to leave Helstone, "from henceforth Dixon obeyed and admired Margaret. She said it was because she was so like poor Master Frederick; but the truth was, that Dixon, as do many others, liked to feel herself ruled by a powerful and decided nature" (44). The latter reason in fact validates her rationalization. Nearer the time of Mrs Hale's death, Dixon

¹⁰ Barbara Leah Harman notes that "it is hard to avoid thinking about Frederick as Margaret's alter ego, not a madwoman in the attic but a sort of mad brother in the wings whose story and whose physical presence are concealed for the better part of the novel", Barbara Leah Harman, "In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", *Victorian Studies* 31.3 (1988): 370.

comments to Margaret, "and when you fire up you're the very image of Master Frederick. I could find in my heart to put you in a passion any day just to see his stormy look coming like a great cloud over your face" (125).

Frederick and Margaret are physically alike, but where her strength has been emphasized, a feature which differentiates her from other women, he "had delicate features, redeemed from effeminacy by the swarthiness of his complexion, and his quick intensity of expression" (238). Margaret is aware in Frederick of those aspects of her own character with which she is struggling to come to terms. "His eyes were generally merry-looking, but at times they and his mouth so suddenly changed, and gave her such an idea of latent passion, that it almost made her afraid". But because of her familiarity with such feelings, she "might fear the violence of the impulsive nature thus occasionally betrayed, but there was nothing in it to make her distrust, or recoil in the least, from the new-found brother" (238). Another reason that she might not fear such passion is because she does not need to see any sexual passion in these feelings because they are her brother's, especially when we compare this with her reaction to Thornton's declaration of love. Instead, for the first time in the novel, she has someone to talk to about herself. This emphasizes the way in which Frederick is not a stranger, not the other. He is similar, not different, allowing identity, not alienation. And while he is there, while Margaret can project her uncomfortable feelings on to Frederick, she can find repose. "The exquisite sensation of relief which she felt in Frederick's presence" (238) is not only for the physical strains which she has been experiencing, but also for the emotional strains, although they are the one subject on which she must remain silent.

Margaret and sexuality - the hollow voice of ideology

In *North and South* Margaret's illness is closely related to her feelings about her sexuality, her confusion over living by the standards of the ideology of femininity, and the constraints placed upon her by her lack of voice. Her growth into womanhood has been well discussed, as have her ambivalence over her sexuality and the linking of sexuality in the public sphere with implications of prostitution.¹¹ However, none of these discussions take into account Margaret's illness. Most ignore it, although Patsy Stoneman comments: "'Shame', then, has reduced Margaret from a fearless girl with 'boundless step' and 'straightforward look' to something like a conventional Victorian lady; 'pallid', 'continually on the point of weeping', she is made to 'lie down on the sofa'".¹² But it is this very convention, Margaret's decline, that needs to be investigated.

Margaret's illness is staged in three parts, and is a consequence of both her "self-sacrifice" and her silenced sexuality. There is the fore-shadowing, in her collapse after her mother's death; her substantial illness after her father's death; and her long period of convalescence at her aunt's house in London, during which she experiences something of a "spiritual" rebirth, a gestation period of silence, meditation and acquiescence, until she emerges renewed, adult, and independent as a social and sexual being.

Her first illness is related not only to her mother's death, but also to the enforced silence she must undergo in the aftermath of the riot and Thornton's proposal. In dealing with her feelings about the public perception of her

¹¹ See, in particular, Stoneman 118-138; Harman 351-374; also Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality, Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century London*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1991) 10.

¹² Stoneman 130.

sexuality, about the way in which her actions were read as being sexual rather than motivated by altruism and in the cause of justice, Margaret is alone. Her mother is dying; she cannot speak on such matters to her father and brother; and she has discovered that the ideological system which has previously given her strength and belief in herself and her actions, sadly inadequate.

During the riot scene Margaret believes that she is acting in the cause of reason, and argues, as she is accustomed, in terms of humanity, breaking down the barriers between class, and operating on the level of individuals. At this point she has stepped outside the feminine role, for she represents voice and articulation. She tells Thornton: "Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. ... Like a man ... speak to them, man to man", recalling Thornton's own comment to Margaret that

"gentleman" is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as "a man," we consider him not merely with regard to his fellowmen, but in relation to himself - to life - to time - to eternity. (158)

Ironically, however, Thornton's solution to the crisis is to ignore such egalitarian sentiments, to provoke the men, and then call in the soldiers, representatives of the patriarchy, "the power of authority and order" (174). Thus in the characters of Margaret and Thornton, there are present in this scene two types of masculine power, reason and order, striving for control.

Repeatedly in this novel Gaskell argues that language is power because it may bring an understanding which results in harmony. Margaret in the riot scene is initially in control of language: "She knew how it was. ... Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face" (171). The men on the other hand are excluded from language; they are powerless and yet dangerous for, as armed

riot/disorder, they confront the soldiers/order with their other, their reverse image. Margaret believes in words: "If Mr Thornton would but say something to them - let them hear his voice only - it seemed as if it would be better than this wild beating and raging against the stony silence that vouchsafed them no word, even of anger and reproach" (171). Thornton is silent; the men make "noise, inarticulate as that of a troop of animals". They are in danger of their passions having "swept away all barriers of reason".¹³ Margaret, a mediator, in terms of language, steps in to provide that reason and reproach - "her eyes smiting them with flaming arrows of reproach" - which Thornton will not. Her action creates unsurety. Here is a scene out of the terms of the ordinary. The confrontation is something that can be read in its own context, since there has been a history of strikes. A woman on the scene is not: "the clogs were arrested in the hands that held them - the countenances, so fell not a moment before, now looked irresolute, and as if asking what this meant" (172). This scene is not part of their usual language and we know already that new scenes must be learnt to be read in a new way.¹⁴ The problem for Margaret is that the scene gets read in the old

¹³ The equation of disorder and the feminine in terms of uncontrolled sexuality is not difficult to see here. The implicit sexual threat to the women (culminating in Margaret's wounding), and the underlying sexual imagery in the scene are discussed by Harman 366-370, as well as by Martin Dodsworth, Introduction, *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 19; Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in three Victorian Novels: "North and South", "Our Mutual Friend", and "Daniel Deronda"* (London: Macmillan, 1981) 43.

¹⁴ Reading correctly and misreading signs because the context is misunderstood play an important part in the novel. Each new experience provides an opportunity for the characters to learn to understand one another in terms of language and reading. Thornton's misreading of Margaret's expressions has already been mentioned. Similarly there is a misunderstanding between the two on the courtesy of shaking hands (80, 118, 155). Mr Hale comments "One had need to learn a different language, and measure by a different standard, up here in Milton" (153). Later Margaret "knew enough now to understand many local interests - nay, even some of the technical words employed by the eager millowners. She silently took a very decided part in the question they were discussing" (157). Higgins, too, insists that the masters are not speaking the same language that he is, and that he will have to be taught if they wish him to understand: "I dare say there's truth in yon Latin books on your shelves; but it's gibberish and not truth to me, unless I know the meaning of the words. If yo', sir, or any other knowledgeable, patient man come to me, and says he'll larn me what the words mean, and not blow me up if I'm a bit stupid, or forget how one thing hangs upon the other - why, in time I might get to see the truth of it; or I may not" (222). It is as well to note that Gaskell is by no means utopian in her outlook, nor providing the simple argument that if the classes/sexes learn each other's language there would automatically be harmony. The implicit warning to the middle classes in Higgins's statement is that he might not accept the truth of their words, that the working class may have different ideas. As Foucault argues about the

terminology, that is, as Barbara Harman points out, her behaviour is “misread” as sexual, since she is a woman in public.¹⁵

Margaret’s attempt at reason, a new kind of power, is thwarted by the two sides of confrontation, the men and Thornton. When the storm breaks, Margaret now moves from masculine role of mediator of reason into a role more fitting, she believes, with the feminine ideal: “she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond” (172). It is to this action that she keeps returning in her later justification to Thornton. It is this action, also, that returns to haunt Thornton with all its physicality: “But all the blood in his body seemed to rush inwards to his heart as he spoke, and he absolutely trembled” (174). While he confronted the men, he saw her as a nuisance, a barrier to his masculinity; now he sees her as a sexual object, “with every nerve in his body thrilling at the thought of her” (174). His perception of her on their next meeting is given in minute physical detail:

production of sexuality, the working class managed for a long time to escape the middle-class deployment of sexuality, which they hesitated to accept, and tended to say was the business of the middle class and no concern of theirs. This sexuality was “foisted on them for the purpose of subjugation”. He continues, “If it is true that sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology, one has to admit that this deployment does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to social classes, and consequently, that it does not produce the same effects in them”, Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol.1 127. Where Thornton initially regards labour relations as a middle-class monologue, Higgin and Gaskell imply the need of a dialogue.

¹⁵ Harman 358, 368-370. For Nina Auerbach, the scene is not to be interpreted solely in terms of sexuality. She believes the emphasis should lie in its theatricality, a moment of conversion for both Thornton (conversion to love, away from the public role) and Margaret, who is “catapulted out of seclusion, into the ‘unwinking glare of many eyes’”. According to Auerbach “at the pinnacle of her shame and glory, Margaret takes on the attributes of a fearfully loved Victorian female type who is both charismatic invalid and female demon. In this intense moment her wound splits her off from her consciousness, becoming the vivid emblem of her public self”. Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 69, 70. While I would agree with Auerbach’s notion of theatricality showing the different possible “selves” available for heroines like Margaret, in her case the fallen woman and the strong woman, I cannot agree that Margaret represents an invalid, for reasons which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Her eyelids dropped half over her eyes; her teeth were shut, not compressed; her lips were just parted over them, allowing the white line to be seen between their curve. Her slow deep breathings dilated her thin and beautiful nostrils; it was the only motion visible on her countenance. (186)

Margaret's dilemma, therefore, is that everyone else perceives her actions in terms of her sexuality. She feels ashamed and gets no physical pleasure from the memory; in fact, the public perception of her sexuality brings her to the point of illness:

That ugly dream of insolent words spoken about herself, could never be forgotten - but could be put aside till she was stronger - for, oh! she was very weak; and her mind sought for some present fact to steady itself upon, and keep it from utterly losing consciousness in another hideous, sickly swoon. (178)

Margaret's problem is that any expression of a woman's sexuality must be accompanied by a sense of shame. As W. R. Greg wrote, there was no difference between the married and unmarried woman's feelings on making "the first sacrifice at the shrine of love" for "the sense of shame is the same in both cases".¹⁶ Gaskell once again exposes the cost of such a construction of sexuality. For Margaret her heroism turns to nightmare. She suffers "a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal regard - a sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes" (184). The result is psychic dis-ease, a moment of illness which allows her, in private, to loosen that control upon her self which she rigidly maintains in the company of her father:

¹⁶ Greg, "Prostitution" 473.

She let her colour go - the false smile fade away - the eyes grow dull with heavy pain. She released her strong will from its laborious task. Till morning she might feel ill and weary.

She lay down and never stirred. To move hand or foot, or even so much as one finger, would have been an exertion beyond the powers of either volition or motion. She was so tired, so stunned, that she thought she never slept at all; her feverish thoughts passed and repassed the boundary between sleeping and waking, and kept their own miserable identity. (184)

The nightmare images persist after Thornton has proposed. As she regretted Henry Lennox's proposal, so Margaret feels repelled by Thornton's words: "she shrank and shuddered as under the fascination of some great power, repugnant to her whole previous life" (190). The violence of Gaskell's language at this point, out of character with the rest of the book, implies that Margaret has undergone a mental rape, as Thornton's words invade her thoughts, expressed by Gaskell with an intrusive quotation from a male author: "To parody a line out of Fairfax's Tasso - 'His strong idea wandered through her thought'" (190).¹⁷ But where Gaskell asserts the authority to appropriate and transform these words, Margaret feels powerless: "She disliked him the more for having mastered her inner will" (191). The scene which the ideology of femininity would construct as one goal of a young woman's life, a proposal of marriage, uncovers the dilemma for that young woman. Marriage is a euphemism for sexuality, and sexuality can only be expressed through shame, or remain silenced. Like the well brought-up Jemima, in *Ruth*, who regarded the news of Ruth's fall with horror:

the diver, leaving the green sward, smooth and known, where his friends stand with their familiar smiling faces, admiring his glad bravery - the diver, down in an instant in the horrid depths of the sea, close to some strange, ghastly, lidless monster, can hardly more feel his blood curdle at the near terror than did Jemima now[.]¹⁸

¹⁷ The original of this line, "Her sweet idea wandered through his thought", shows that Gaskell deliberately reversed the gender roles, and made its implication threatening instead of benign. The original quoted in the explanatory notes to *North and South*, ed. Dorothy Collin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 535.

¹⁸ *Ruth* 323.

so Margaret perceives her sexuality as some kind of monster:

the deep impression made by the interview was like that of a horror in a dream; that will not leave the room although we waken up, and rub our eyes, and force a rigid smile upon our lips. It is there - there, cowering and gibbering, with fixed ghastly eyes, in some corner of the chamber, listening to hear whether we dare to breathe of its presence to anyone. And we dare not; poor cowards that we are! (191)¹⁹

Faced with the power of male language and locked in the realm of the father, the symbolic realm of a patriarchal ideology which predicates women's sexuality on a sense of shame, Margaret is reduced to powerlessness. Her thoughts pursue her: "she could not be alone, prostrate, powerless as she was" (184). The confrontation between Margaret's need to believe in the power of language and its inadequacy to fulfil this task manifests itself in terms of nightmare. And, according to Julia Kristeva, "if ... the symbolic dimension proves to be insufficient, subjects find themselves back at the dead-end of a helplessness leading to inaction and death".²⁰

In order to avoid the sexual reading, Margaret must find other ways to account for her behaviour within the repertoire of what is acceptably feminine. As Rosemary Bodenheimer explains, "Margaret's appeals to the ideology of rescuing womanhood have to be read as retreats from the violent turbulence of mixed emotions to the haven of idealistic theory".²¹ Thus Margaret reasons with herself: "if I saved one blow, one cruel angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman's work. Let them insult my maiden pride as

¹⁹ The connection can be made here between Gaskell's image and the madwoman in the attic, which Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar take to represent the repressed sexuality and anger of the Victorian woman writer.

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* 36.

²¹ Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story* 66.

they will - I walk pure before God" (183); and to Thornton she argues: "It was only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger" (187). Later she reiterates: "any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers" (188). She calls upon that ideal of femininity which constructs female behaviour in terms of innate instinctual desires to place her own wishes second to those of a man; that redefines women's sexuality in terms of the maternal, W. R. Greg's "strange and sublime unselfishness ... a positive love of self-sacrifice".²² Yet the text belies her in two ways, and shows the ideal to be hollow and meaningless. Firstly none of the other women did come down to help Thornton, or even goad him into going out in the first place. Margaret's parallel in strength and determination, Mrs Thornton, who boasted of defying the workers at a previous strike, was terrified, as well as disapproving of her son's actions once she heard of them. Jane, the servant, would not leave the house even after the riot had been quelled, and Fanny, Thornton's "feminine" sister, fainted. Secondly, the text has already undermined Margaret's position. At the height of the riot, when she flung herself in front of Thornton, the narrative voice proclaimed: "*If she thought her sex would be a protection - if, with shrinking eyes, she had turned away from the terrible anger of these men, in any hope that ere she looked again they would have paused, and reflected, and slunk away, and vanished - she was wrong*" (172, emphasis added). The men in fact, did not have those "instinctive" reactions of wishing to protect a weak and frail woman, because those reactions were part of the framework of middle-class ideology and definition of a woman, of helpless femininity. Her appeal to "natural instinct" on the part of women is subverted by the demonstration that another such "natural instinct" ("chivalry" or whatever) that she relies on in

²² Greg, "Prostitution" 459.

men is already shown to be a social construction inappropriately expected of all men whatever their class. She expected the men to act like "gentlemen", to be bound by a construction of male behaviour such as that produced by Ruskin or W. R. Greg. Indeed it is interesting to place the passage in *North and South* alongside a similar one, on male chastity, in "Prostitution":²³

... what would be the result on the general tone of society, were the sexual desire gratified as soon as it arose? Where should we feel that reverence for the female sex, that tenderness towards their feelings, that deep devotion of the heart to them, which is the beautiful and purifying part of love? Is it not certain that all of delicate and chivalric [*sic*] which still pervades our sentiment towards women, may be traced to *repressed*, and therefore hallowed and elevated passion?²⁴

Here the links between the need to protect women and sexuality are explicitly made, but the protection is from male sexuality. Thornton's inner struggle before he proposes can be placed in this context:

He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck, impatiently felt as it had been at the time; but now the recollection of her clinging defence of him seemed to thrill him through and through - to melt away every resolution, all power of self-control, as if it were wax to fire. (186)

In fact Thornton is as bound by his ideological perceptions as Margaret. He reads her actions in terms of the ideal of femininity and hopes "she might droop, and flush, and flutter to his arms, as to her natural home and resting-place" (186). He

²³ Interesting especially because of the connections between Gaskell and Greg. W. R. Greg was a family friend of the Gaskells. Greg's "Prostitution", which made reference to and quoted from *Mary Barton* first appeared in 1850. I have already discussed the implications of Greg's article for a reading of *Ruth* (see Chapter 6). *North and South* was serialized in *Household Words* between September, 1854 and January, 1855. Gaskell wrote of Greg in March, 1854, "He is a distinguished writer in our 'Edinburgh Review'; choosing subjects relating to politics, or political oeconomy in general, but sometimes reviewing 'belles lettres'. For instance he reviewed and abused 'Mary Barton'; and we are none the less friends", *Letters* 257. John Geoffrey Sharps suggests that W. R. Greg was a possible model for Thornton, *Sharps* 231.

²⁴ Greg, "Prostitution" 480, emphasis in original.

is unwilling or, as yet, unable to recognize her strength beyond the restrictive bounds of such a cultural construction.

As constructed by the ideal of femininity, women's sexuality finds no respectable voice except in the language of self-sacrifice and maternity. Any alternative is horrifying to Margaret, as both Stoneman and Harman have pointed out. The public show of women's sexuality is only to be expressed in terms of prostitution, the fallen woman. Margaret despairs, "Oh how low I have fallen that they should say that of me" (183). Despite her argument to the contrary, Margaret is attracted to Thornton. Her awakening desire sets her in turmoil and leaves her almost speechless in the process. She is in new territory, of the body and disorder, away from the securities and certainties of "reason". Thornton talks "lowering his voice to such a tender intensity of passion that she shivered and trembled before him"; she replies icily "though the words came faltering out, as if she knew not where to find them". Her experience so far has not prepared her for such a moment; she does not understand, and she must fall back on old certainties: "Your way of speaking shocks me...It might not be so if I understood the kind of feeling you describe" (188). The tension in scenes such as this lies in the difference between what Margaret is saying, in the only language she has to hand, that of her education and previous experience, and her unconscious desires, articulated through her body: "again the deep *carnation* blush, but this time with eye kindling with indignation rather than shame" (188; emphasis added). Patsy Stoneman considers Margaret's blushing as an alternative to words, but where I see this as unconscious articulation, for Stoneman it is "based on concealment of motives". Blushing, she argues, is a deception forced upon young women who were supposed to show "an acceptable sign of modesty" while at the same time concealing their awareness that marriage (and its corollaries of sex and maternity) was their proper goal in life. She writes, "Margaret's denial of any personal motive in protecting Thornton,

and her denial of being in a sexually compromising situation with Frederick, derive from prescribed standards of 'maidenless' [*sic*"].²⁵ She too would argue that these feminine qualities are not innate or instinctive, but socially constructed, and that Margaret suffers psychologically from having to conform to such standards.²⁶ However there is no link made between the psychological and physical suffering that Margaret undergoes, the latter being seen as "conventional", despite Stoneman's own citing of Hélène Deutsch who links blushing "with fatigue and depression as anxiety responses to repressed sexual consciousness".²⁷

What must be considered here is that Gaskell as well was bound by the conventions of the feminine ideal, by how much she herself could articulate Margaret's sexual feelings. Her emphasis on Margaret's silent, voiceless state, as well as the stress placed on the need for language within the novel, show her writing about but within such constraints. As part of a wider discourse, she is engaging in the redefinition of women's sexuality, widening it to encompass the physical attraction felt by Margaret and Thornton, which is silenced for Margaret in the dominant ideology. Nevertheless Gaskell herself is ambivalent about such feelings. Stoneman sees this ambivalence expressed in the ending, where although Margaret and Thornton have, in her view, reached a point of "balanced emancipation", rejecting their previous ideological stances, Margaret's blush of "beautiful shame" (424) leaves "the most stubborn problem ... still with us".²⁸ Harman, on the other hand, reads the ending more positively and less conservatively. She argues that Gaskell "suggests both that female sexuality is almost unmanageably potent - affiliated with exposure, criminality, indiscretion,

²⁵ Stoneman 130-131. The word here should be, I think, "maidenliness".

²⁶ Stoneman 131.

²⁷ Stoneman 130.

²⁸ Stoneman 138.

and immoral secrecy - and, at the same time, that this is emphatically not stigmatizing", and continues that Gaskell "converts public into private shame, and private shame into the acknowledgement of mature sexuality, thus affirming rather than condemning the inevitable connectedness of public and private life, and imagining a world in which their explosive union can be equally accommodated".²⁹

Rosemary Bodenheimer takes account of the ending in what is, to me, the most acceptable reading. She sees Gaskell as neither reactionary nor revolutionary, and in her discussion of Margaret's central dilemma, "the difficult problem for women", she writes:

Gaskell's way of phrasing the question highlights her interest in the process of accommodation and her avoidance of the fervor of revolt. For her there is no fantasy of rebellion, subversion, or a separated woman's world; she imagines a negotiated settlement that asserts a power of choice even in the acceptance of dependence. The romantic solution with which Margaret is finally rewarded includes such negotiations. Margaret's marriage to Thornton is carefully defined as an economic and social partnership as well as a domestic settlement.³⁰

Nevertheless, Bodenheimer does not really resolve the problem of sexuality in her reading, and before any resolution can be reached Margaret must undergo the next two stages of her illness.

²⁹ Harman 374.

³⁰ Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story* 63.

Margaret and Self-Sacrifice

When Margaret's mother dies, Margaret must put her own needs second. The situation demands her own self-abnegation as, apparently, the dutiful daughter and sister. Yet even here Gaskell transforms Margaret's actions. Once again gender roles are confused as Margaret provides the strength and protection for the men who break down and it is Margaret who bears the burden of organising the funeral: "the father and brother depended upon her; while they were giving way to grief she must be working, planning, considering" (242). In contrast with the ideal of the childlike angel in the house, Margaret "rose from her trembling and despondency, and became as a strong angel of comfort to her father and brother" (241). The biblical tones of this passage reinforce the notion of the ministering angel, the only time Margaret is so compared in the novel. Nevertheless, although she is strong, Margaret also acts according to the dictates of the feminine ideal. Even Frederick reads her actions in terms of self-abnegation. He notices how pale she is and gets her to lie on the sofa. "You have been thinking of everybody, and no one has thought of you" (246). Spiritual guide, angel, pallid, sofa, is this a natural progression? Frederick would relieve her of the responsibility which, although stressful, gives her a sense of personal identity. "Lie on this sofa - there is nothing for you to do". Since the hidden implication of self-sacrifice is precisely that - self sacrifice - Margaret begins to fade. Her father, generally so unperceptive, is aware that she is "so thoughtful of others, so gentle and patient" (258). The bodilessness of the spiritual state of angelic patience, or of the angelic patient, is also noticed by Thornton, whose perception is always one of her physical and sexual attractiveness: "Her stately beauty was *dimmed*. ... The expression on her countenance was of gentle *patient* sadness. ... She took her work and sat down very *quiet and silent*" (262, emphases added).

Margaret becomes increasingly voiceless. If we enter the symbolic realm, the social order, through language, then lack of voice, lack of a language, keeps us permanently in the state of the "infans", the undistinguished child state. But, according to Margaret's anecdote of the man isolated from society, this is not innocence so much as ignorance. For only by entering the symbolic can the subject also enter the imaginary. Margaret appeals constantly to the symbolic order. She believes in reason, control, and the rule of law. When she escapes this she is troubled by her own desires, for which she finds no voice. Whenever she has to express her feelings about Thornton, she cannot. She is annoyed at Frederick's perception of him as a "shopman", especially since she once viewed him in the same light. But she cannot remedy this impression: "she wanted to make Frederick understand what kind of a man Mr Thornton was - but she was tongue-tied" (248). When her father remarks that she is "getting to do Mr Thornton justice at last", she "had a strange choking at her heart, which made her *unable to answer*" (299, emphasis added). At this very point she is appealing to the power of language to heal the rift between Higgins and Thornton and arguing the importance of dialogue between individuals to break down class barriers. "If he and Mr Thornton would speak out together as man to man - if Higgins would forget that Mr Thornton was a master, and speak to him as he does to us - and Mr Thornton would be patient enough to listen to him with his human heart, not with his master's ears -" (299). But what is being advocated for class relationships might apply equally well for gender relationships, except that the woman is kept without a voice with which to enter the dialogue. It is not only a matter of her position as a woman in a society which restricts her actions to the private domestic sphere. Even to her brother and her father she could not express her desires and emotions concerning Thornton, closely as they converse on other issues. The only way she might communicate with Thornton is with a male voice. "'Oh!' thought she, 'I wish I were a man, that I could go and force him to express his disapprobation, and tell him honestly that I knew I deserved

it" (299). Since this is not possible, men must mediate for her. She appeals to Mr Bell to tell Thornton the truth about the scene at the railway station, and ultimately it is through Higgins that Thornton finds out.

Lack of voice is part of her decline. Even before the matter is complicated by her knowledge that her behaviour has been misread in sexual terms, while she still believes that Thornton's coolness is the result of discovering that she told a lie, "the very mention of his name renewed her trouble, and produced a relapse into the feeling of depressed, pre-occupied exhaustion. She gave way to listless languour" (278). When Thornton sends an enquiry about the family she does not want to be mentioned and her father notes that she is shivering and has turned quite pale (279). If ill health is associated with the feminine, Margaret finds it difficult to be "feminine" for always she struggles to be controlled, put aside what she regards as weakness.³¹ Julia Kristeva writes that "feminine depression is occasionally concealed by a feverish activity that gives the depressed person the appearance of a practical woman, at ease with herself, who thinks only of being useful".³² Margaret puts on "such a mask", as Kristeva terms it: "Suddenly it struck her that this [listless languour] was a strange manner to show her patience, or to reward her father for his watchful care of her all through the day. She sat up, and offered to read aloud". Read aloud, presumably, from some male text, and thus find a voice, not of her own, but as a bearer of male words.³³ Her potential illness here, be it feminine weakness or the repression of desire, is averted by the strength of her self-control, her need to be in the realm of order. "She *seemed* much as usual the next day" (279, emphasis added). Her behaviour can be read as "not unnatural symptoms in the

³¹ Margaret can be compared with Mrs Thornton, who also despises weakness and strives for self control. Margaret, of course, is destined to be another Mrs Thornton.

³² Kristeva, *Black Sun* 80.

³³ See Homans 30, for an explanation of this as one of the figure she sees "literalizing" women's place in language as "bearing the word".

early days of grief" although the implication is that this is a misreading. Her father then declines "in proportion to her re-establishment in health" (279).³⁴

The best example of Margaret's desire for self-control is the episode of the lie, her confrontation with the constable, where the public realm intrudes upon the domestic. In this episode Margaret represses her self, to such a degree that her action is expressed in terms of death. She goes against her own sense of right, jeopardises her own integrity, in order to save her brother. She interprets this later as an act of cowardice, but her lie has implications for her far beyond the question of her truthfulness. Through Thornton's witnessing of her at the railway station, and his awareness of her lie, her very identity is called into question, for improper behaviour loses a woman her "name". When Margaret cries "Oh, Frederick! Frederick! ... what have I not sacrificed for you!" (273), the extent of her sacrifice is not yet apparent to her, but the death imagery of the previous episode makes it quite clear that a sacrifice has taken place. She has put her brother's safety before her own values and reputation and in doing so denies her self. As Mr Bell later tells her, "You forgot yourself in thought for another" (386). During the interview with the constable, her indignation is "so kept down and controlled"; her lips are fuller "owing to the enforced tension of the muscles"; she expresses "unwonted sullen defiance"; she has "the unconscious look of a sleepwalker". The constable is aware that she does not behave in the appropriate feminine manner. "The lady standing before him showed no emotion, no fluttering fear, no anxiety, no desire to end the interview" (263), and

³⁴ As has been mentioned Mr Hale is often "feminized" within the novel, at this point by abdication of voice. He also undergoes a decline/depression: Margaret becomes aware of how, after the death of her mother, her father's own health declines. His "spirits, always feeble, now became too frequently depressed". If illness is a feminizing quality, in this case Mr Hale is marginalized, kept too much in the feminine sphere, at home, when he really needs to identify with those out in the wider masculine public sphere. Margaret "was conscious of the want under which he was suffering, unknown to himself; the want of a man's intercourse with men. At Helstone there had been perpetual occasion for an interchange of visits with neighbourly clergymen" (331).

these negatives serve not only to negate the stereotype, but also to stress Margaret's negation of herself, the very life taken from her. Her answer "sounded like the mechanical repetition of her first reply"; she has a "glassy, dreamlike stare"; and "she had not moved any more than if she had been some great Egyptian statue" (265). Yet the control is not absolute. She feels "a quick, sharp pain", "momentary agony", but even this reinforces the image of sacrifice and death, for it is like "the torture of some creature brought to bay" (264). When the constable leaves, she falls "in a dead swoon" (265), and remains "as still and white as death on the study floor" while "there is no other sign of consciousness remaining" (267). If to live means to find voice and articulate the self, Margaret must relearn this. She has misused her voice, told a lie, denied herself. As she comes round, "the first symptom of returning life was a quivering about the lips - a mute soundless attempt at speech". Reborn as "infans", she needs to pass once again into the symbolic order, place herself within language, and she searches for her comb "with an intuitive desire to efface the traces of weakness, and *bring herself into order again*" (267, emphasis added). Nevertheless, because of her position as a woman, silence is imposed upon her. "She did not speak unless spoken to" (271). She becomes ill, pallid, wan, languid, and is forced to lie on the sofa and be cared for by her father. But by putting her father first, keeping her silence, determining to "bear the burden alone" (277), she takes control, re-establishes order and a semblance of health.

The repression of her desires and the knowledge of her sexuality become more and more difficult to sustain, however. Accused by Mrs Thornton of improper behaviour, and aware that Thornton knows of her lie, she feels humiliated and degraded.³⁵ She falls back once again into the language of the feminine ideal: "I could bear up for papa; because that is a natural, pious duty".

³⁵ See Harman 370-373 for a full discussion of the implications of Margaret's appearance in a public place with a man, the coded language of the fallen woman.

Self-abnegation thus becomes a defence, a means of coping with the wearying "continual call upon [her] for strength". However, it also allows her to justify ignoring her troubling thoughts. She defiantly claims, "I will not - I will not think of myself and my own position. I won't examine my own feelings", although she stops "from time to time to wipe her eyes, with an impatience of gesture at the tears *that would come*, in spite of all her bravery" (312, emphasis added). Her final acknowledgement of her love for Thornton brings her no relief since it is another source of inner conflict: "But I won't care for him. I surely am mistress enough of myself to control this wild, strange, miserable feeling" (318). "So exhausted by this recent struggle with herself", she longs to return to London and "that old well-ordered, monotonous life" where "she could regain her power and command over herself" (319). She gradually declines, forgetting herself in the care of her father, "complete and beautiful" in "her meek spirit of obedience" (333). "Languid", "nerveless", "her mind had lost its elasticity" (332) and she busies herself with teaching the Boucher children, but "her heart seemed dead at the end of all her efforts ... her life seemed still bleak and dreary" (333). Margaret is truly the angel in the house, but at a cost. She herself is "dead", "unconscious", and "silent".

The final stage of her decline occurs after the death of her father.³⁶ Left with no one to care for, to negate and thus forget her self, Margaret lapses into passivity. On hearing the news of his death, she stood as if "she had been turned to stone; so white and immovable was she" (342). The images of her silent, deathlike, self-less state intensify:

³⁶ It could be argued, in psychoanalytic terms, that Margaret's illness is more severe after the death of her father than after that of her mother. However, in Margaret's case, although she is more devastatingly silenced after his death, the matter is not so clear cut, through the ambivalence surrounding her father. Although her father, he does not always represent The Father. He has, in fact, given up The Word of orthodox religion, and has marginalized himself in a way that other men in the novel, such as Henry Lennox, a man of law, find hard to understand. Indeed, Margaret provides her father with words at key points in the novel. See above.

The shock had been great. Margaret fell into a state of prostration, which did not show itself in sobs and tears, or even find the relief of words. She lay on the sofa with her eyes shut, never speaking but when spoken to, and then replying in whispers ... her physical exhaustion was evidently too complete for her to undertake any such fatigue. ... Margaret lay motionless, and almost breathless ... the languid shake of head proved that in such a state as Margaret was in, food would only choke, not nourish her ... that helpless, homeless, friendless Margaret - lying as still on that sofa as if it were an altar-tomb, and she the stone statue on it. (343, 344)

Her aunt finds her "white, motionless, speechless, tearless" (345). Mr Bell thinks of her as "the pale sorrow he had left behind him, sitting motionless, with bent head and folded hands" and tells Thornton she is "too weak and miserable to have a will of her own" (348). Margaret must become an object of others' care. Her aunt and cousin look after her "as if she were a lap-dog belonging to them" (348), and she is "petted", and "bought every delicacy, or soft luxury in which [her aunt] herself would have burrowed and sought comfort" (355). In this silent animal-like state, Margaret must come to terms with her life. The ideology by which she has lived and formed her self has proven hollow and deadening. She lacks even the language to express her self, and replies to Mr Bell's offer of money by repeating his own words, because "in her weak state she could not think of any other words" (354).

The pampered luxury of London, however, although nurturing, is not enough to enliven Margaret, who is afraid of becoming "sleepily deadened into forgetfulness". Even the old role of looking after Edith, the self-abnegating thinking of another, leaves "a strange unsatisfied vacuum" in her heart (362). London life is self-centred and shallow, Edith little more than a doll dressed according to her husband's tastes "with a view to her beauty making a sufficient impression on the world" (363), and the dinner parties a realm where conversation "exhausted itself in sparkle and crackle". Tired of the company of

those who "squandered their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words" (396), Margaret returns to Helstone trying to find some meaning, a return to the apparent certainties of childhood. But everywhere she finds change, not only in the place and people, but in herself, and in language as well. Things are called by different names. When she attempts to help a small girl with her lesson, she is corrected by the schoolmistress:

"I beg your pardon," said the Vicar's wife, all eyes and ears; "but we are taught by Mr. Milsome to call "a" an - who can remember?"
 "An adjective absolute," said half-a-dozen voices at once. And Margaret sat abashed. The children knew more than she did. ... Margaret spoke no more during the lesson. (381)

The nostalgic search for the past is, for Margaret, a literalizing of the state Kristeva describes as the meaning of and in language:

Rather than seek the meaning of despair (it is either obvious or metaphysical), let us acknowledge that there is meaning only in despair. The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words.³⁷

On the visit to Helstone, Margaret reaches the depths of her decline. She realizes that she can never recapture the past, that change is inevitable, even to seemingly secure and immutable truths:

A sense of change, of individual nothingness, of perplexity and disappointment, overpowered Margaret. Nothing had been the same; and this slight, all-pervading instability, had given her greater pain than if all had been too entirely changed for her to recognize it. ... "I am so tired - so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no

³⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun* 5-6.

place; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually." (389)

In her state of "nothingness" Margaret is not only mourning the loss of her parents, but also of herself, as a child, and as a young woman who has sought truth in the ideology of femininity and found it to be wanting. Yet by accepting change, Margaret can face her own adulthood and come to terms with herself.

Gaskell shows change to be a part of the process of life, "slight, yet pervading all", where households are changed "by absence, or death, or marriage, or the natural mutations brought by days and months and years, and thence through manhood to age, whence we drop like fruit, fully ripe, into the quiet mother earth" (382). The lyricism of this passage masks its subversive content. Gaskell's "nature" appears reassuringly maternal and dependably cyclical. But at the same time, by showing that it is also evolutionary in its "natural mutations", Gaskell validates and authorizes her own writing of change, her redefinition of the ideology of femininity. Margaret returns to London strengthened by the knowledge that "looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress of all around me is right and necessary. I must not think so much of how circumstances affect me myself, but how they affect others ..." (390). This, however, is not a return to the old ideology of self-sacrifice. Along with thoughts for others, comes the thought for herself. When Mr Bell becomes ill, she stands up to her aunt, and "surprised herself at the firmness with which she asserted something of her right to independence of action" (400). After his death she does not relapse into illness, but "roused herself from her heavy trance of almost superstitious hopelessness, and began to feel that even around her joy and gladness might gather" (400). Her silent absorption on holiday at the seaside when "Edith voted her moped", was not an unwilling loss of words, for "those hours at the seaside were not lost, as anyone might have seen who had the

perception to read, or the care to understand, the look that Margaret's face was gradually acquiring" (403). Her new resolution sees her take "her life into her own hands":

Before they went to Cromer, she had been as docile to her aunt's laws as if she were still the scared little stranger who cried herself to sleep that first night in the Harley Street nursery. But she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for woman, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working ... and now, chastened even by what the world called her good fortune, she charmed her reluctant aunt into acquiescence to her will. So Margaret gained the acknowledgement of her right to follow her own ideas of duty. (405)

No longer the child-like angel, she has become a strong woman, who has learned to balance self-fulfilment and selflessness. Gaskell, in fact, highlights the two roles for women by the use of comedy. When the helpless childish Edith pleads, three times, that Margaret should not be "strong-minded" and that she should choose Margaret's clothes, Margaret replies, "Don't be afraid, Edith. I'll faint on your hands at the servant's dinner-time, the very first opportunity; and then, what with Sholto playing with the fire, and the baby crying, you'll begin to wish for a strong-minded woman, equal to any emergency". But she is not joking when she lets Edith know that "no one can please me but myself" (405). Margaret is not "feminized" by her illness in the way that Mary Barton is domesticated.³⁸ She controls her money, she decides to do charity work, she expresses opinions and learns about business, and she decides to lend money to Thornton.

³⁸ See also Chapter 12, on the works of Charlotte Yonge, for a full discussion of illness as a feminizing process.

By acting as an equal, Margaret has refused to accept sexual difference and has encroached upon male language. She does not see her actions in gender terms, hence her appeals to reason, to dialogue, and to truth (as in opposition to her lie); she spoke in public at the riot, but not as a woman. However, society, conventions, and other readings of her behaviour forced her back into silence, the woman's place. During the novel she is being made into a woman, when she does not see herself in those terms; she is most uncomfortable when she is confronted with those readings of her behaviour which are gender tagged, such the riot scene, and at the railway station. Her behaviour even at the end is seen as being like "a strong woman", namely a contradictory animal. Her appeal to dialogue is not only a feminine call to the personal, but also a masculine call to language. But stuck within the body of a woman she must come to terms with that body, see her "womanly", rather than a strictly feminine, way. Thornton is the most persistent in reading her behaviour in gender terms. He sees her as feminine and is attracted to her body, while disliking her behaviour because it is "masculine", because she does not act in a way that women should according to his ideological stance. Traditional readings of the book have her feminizing him, reducing and domesticating his harshness, and roughness, and integrating his public and domestic lives. Mary Eagleton writes, for example:

One location for this reintegration of feminine values has been the novel. It has frequently concerned itself with the ideological confrontation between masculine and feminine values and has offered as resolution the "feminizing" of the aggressive, ego-centred hero by the gentle, conciliatory qualities of the heroine: Dombey reformed by his endlessly suffering Florence, or the ruthless manufacturers, Robert Moore in *Shirley* or John Thornton in *North and South*, made more amenable and socially responsible by the intervention of caring women.³⁹

³⁹ Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1986) 89.

However, it is equally a matter of Thornton's wanting to feminize and diminish Margaret, have her "flutter to his arms" (186). Margaret must integrate her womanhood with her more masculine tagged behaviours, that is, find a balance. Every time Margaret, in attempting to find a voice, to articulate herself, tries a subject position near to the "masculine" realm, she is silenced by her femininity; either the silence imposed upon her sexuality, or her innocence/ignorance about the repercussions of certain behaviours, which are linked with sexual awareness. Thus the question arises, is it impossible for a woman to be other than a woman as constructed by the dominant ideology? What happens if she steps outside of the constructed role? Gaskell exposes the hollowness of the ideological voice, tied to the signified, and masking an emptiness while promising a plenitude.

It is the strong Margaret who can meet Thornton, the "architect of his own fortunes" (407), at the end of the novel. Margaret still acts within the realm of female service, finding fulfilment through women's work and woman's mission, and ultimately, we presume, by marrying the man she loves. Yet, there is a significant difference. The life is one which Margaret has chosen; her role is more public than before; and in all likelihood she will contribute more than money to the running of Thornton's mills. There is a sense of articulation in all this, of voice, of choice, the sense of a new kind of marriage. Thornton too has had to reassess the ideology of weak and helpless femininity he believed in. In *North and South*, therefore, Gaskell advocates speaking on an individual level, listening with a "human heart", and putting the person before gender and class.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, if one part of Margaret's inner conflict has been resolved, and she has found the balance between personal duty to oneself and public duty to others, Gaskell is less clear on the silencing of sexuality. Margaret's immediate idea is to ignore it, and Gaskell's method is to displace it. Gaskell shows

⁴⁰ Stoneman discusses and dismisses adverse reactions to such a solution, from critics such as Margaret Ganz and Deirdre David, 134.

Margaret's maternal feelings directed towards Edith's child and diverted into philanthropic work. Thus while acknowledging those desires, Gaskell herself cannot escape the ideology that fulfilment comes not just through the fulfilment of sexual desire, but also through motherhood. However, in the embrace of the concluding scene, we are left not with the image of Margaret the mother, but Margaret the lover.⁴¹ In her acceptance of Thornton, there is a taste of an equality modified only by the fact that they also have to live as social beings within the society that shaped them - yet they stand together as "that man" and "that woman" (424), not man and wife, or man and girl. It is perhaps as far as Gaskell could go under the circumstances.

⁴¹ See above for other readings of the ending of the novel.

Chapter 8

Cousin Phillis: Innocence, Eden, and the Ordering of the World

"I did not think I had any right to say out to him what I believed - namely, that she loved him dearly, and had felt his absence even to the injury of her health."

Paul Manning, narrator of *Cousin Phillis*.

"Only for a short time, Paul. Then - we will go back to the peace of the old days. I know we shall, I can, and I will."

Phillis Holman in *Cousin Phillis*.

The English middle class was being forged at a time of exceptional turmoil and threatening economic and political disorder. It is at such times that the endemic separation of social categories, which exaggerate differences between groups, including men and women, produces intensified efforts to create a "semblance of order".

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750-1850* Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall trace the way in which the growing middle class structured their world around class and gender difference with the increasing emphasis on separate spheres for men and women. They argue that the public and private realms were not so much part of a political debate about state versus private interest, but "a common-sense distinction between the realm of morality and emotion and that of rational activity".¹ According to their research, the middle classes had grown, by the middle of the nineteenth century, from a group marked by differences of interest and divided by internal dissension into "a powerful unified culture".² The domestic ideology was embraced by people of differing political and religious beliefs, men and women alike, and embodied in institutions and practices, delineating gender and class differences at a time of rapid economic, social and political change. They write:

¹ Davidoff and Hall 13.

² Davidoff and Hall 23.

One of the strongest strands binding together urban and rural, nonconformist and Anglican, Whig, Tory and radical, manufacturer, farmer and professional, wealthy and modest, was the commitment to an imperative moral code and the reworking of their domestic world into a proper setting for its practice. In the early part of this period this did not mean that women had to be confined within this domestic sphere or that men had no part in it. But the home was strongly associated with a form of femininity which was becoming the hallmark of the middle class ...³

One of the centres for their study was Birmingham. The city had grown rapidly in the century preceding 1840, the population doubling twice between 1740 and 1800, and increasing a further 41 per cent between 1821-31.⁴ The period also saw the emergence in Birmingham of an increasingly articulate middle class, as well as the emergence of a common culture. It is from this Birmingham that Paul Manning arrives in "the county town of Eltham" at the beginning of *Cousin Phillis*.⁵

Like Drumble in *Cranford*, Birmingham exists on the margin of the rural world of *Cousin Phillis*. Nevertheless its influence is profound. The older rural world is to be disturbed by more than industrial technology, represented by the coming of the railways. In Paul Manning and his father we have the new Birmingham men, whose ideas and philosophy of life construct the new hegemonic middle-class masculine world order. Paul's father, who started life as a workman, is making his mark in the manufacturing world, through his skill, ingenuity and inventions. Despite his working-class background, "his hands, blackened beyond the power of soap and water by years of labour in the foundry" (248), as a self-made man he expresses the views of the urban middle class and, as Davidoff and Hall point out, by the 1830s "the middle-class view was becoming

³ Davidoff and Hall 25.

⁴ Davidoff and Hall 39.

⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford/Cousin Phillis*, ed. Peter Keating (1864; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 219. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

the triumphant common sense of the Victorian age".⁶ John Kucich argues that Paul is an "unmanly narrator" and his name, Manning, ironic, but even so, Paul is masculine in his expected life pattern.⁷ The eldest son, he follows his father's upwardly mobile path. Paul himself acknowledges that his situation as clerk under the engineer Holdsworth, on the branch line from Eltham to Hornby, was a position rather above that of his father's in life: "or perhaps I should say, above the station in which he was born and bred; for he was raising himself every year in men's consideration and respect" (219). Paul has the freedom to live away from home to learn his career, before consolidating the family and firm by marrying his father's partner's daughter. In this he is not unusual, for Davidoff and Hall have traced how family and business enterprise were intertwined and "the crucial role of marriage in business affairs permeates the lives of the middle class in this period".⁸

Paul's apparent freedom, however, is denied Phillis. As a girl she is restricted to the domestic sphere, and as Patsy Stoneman has claimed:

Although she is eager for technical knowledge ... it does not feed into her practical life as for Paul and her father; although her life round the house and farm is active enough, the female models offered by literature do not stress physical or psychological maturity.⁹

Stoneman interprets the story as "an optimistic version of evolution", rather than "a mythic world of pastoral *stasis*". Here "natural cycles and the dialectics of history work harmoniously together" as Holman retains the best of the old order while accepting Paul's father's scientific innovations. The "one unassimilated

⁶ Davidoff and Hall 28.

⁷ John Kucich, "Transgression and Sexual Difference in Elizabeth Gaskell's Novels", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32.2 (1990): 191.

⁸ Davidoff and Hall 221.

⁹ Stoneman 163.

factor" in this is Phillis's growth to maturity, which shows, according to Stoneman, "that while sexual consciousness is spontaneous, shame is a social imposition".¹⁰ Nevertheless, although I would agree with Stoneman's analysis of the ideological restrictions placed upon Phillis, I would go further to look at other cultural silences placed upon her within the text. Although desire might be spontaneous, the shaping of sexual consciousness must be seen as sited in a social and cultural milieu. Phillis's "natural" consciousness is variously shaped by the people around her. Patsy Stoneman discusses, for example, how Holdsworth perceives Phillis both as Ceres, when he sketches her with wheat in her hair (272), and as the Sleeping Beauty.¹¹ This duality, indeed opposition, both acknowledges her desire and silences it. The choice implies a sexuality based on maternal fecundity or childlike passivity. There is no place for her to find her own voice and express her own subjectivity. The greatest silence that surrounds Phillis is the silence about her future.

For Phillis is an anomaly, a woman out of time. She is a girl who is still a child, as girls should be under the dominant ideology, but one placed between the old world and the new. She has grown up in a world of rural isolation, where the pattern of living is more like that a preindustrial lifestyle which Davidoff and Hall trace as the tradition from which the new middle-class ideology evolved:

Ideas of a woman's place were underpinned by legal, political and social practices which subordinated women. This was combined, however, with a recognition of their economic worth in the family enterprise. The Puritan metaphor of man as sun and woman as moon captures the relative positions of male and female. The draper's daughter helping in the shop, the farmer's wife running

¹⁰ Stoneman 161.

¹¹ Stoneman 164.

the dairy, the printer's widow carrying on his business, all were well established routes for women.¹²

On Hope farm too, there is not the later rigid demarcation of the spheres. Although Phillis's mother's work is predominantly domestic, her husband includes her in the running of the farm. Paul remarks, "regardless of my presence, he went over the day's doings with her" (234). Phillis is active out in the harvest fields with her father. The living space also emphasizes the way in which the lines between class and gender were less rigidly drawn. The hub of the house was "the large house-place, living-room, dining-room, whichever you might like to call it" (234). Paul's inability to find a suitable name for the room indicates how unusual such a room is for him. Here Holman can read, Phillis read and sew, and her mother do the ironing and so on, while the open door communicates with the kitchen. When this door is shut on the evening of Paul's first visit, cousin Holman explains that it is in his honour for "when we've no stranger with us, the minister is so fond of keeping the door open, and talking to the men and maids, just as much as to Phillis and me". For the minister "it brings us all together like a household just before we meet as a household in prayer" (238). Thus although the centre of the house might be the domestic space, there are not the connotations of it being solely the feminine sphere.¹³

¹² Davidoff and Hall 25.

¹³ See Davidoff and Hall for a discussion of the move to segregate space in the new industrial middle-class urban homes, especially in the building of new suburban villas in Birmingham, "physically, financially, and socially removed from the enterprise", where productive work was "banished from the domestic area". "Within this space, cooking eating, washing, sleeping and other 'back stage' functions then began to be separated from polite social intercourse and eventually have special places for each function", 359.

Gender and silence: Phillis as object of male narration

Phillis has been educated beyond the needs of the old world of her mother, yet she does not fit the model of the new middle-class domestic angel/daughter/wife. The way in which Phillis's anomalous position is highlighted is by having her perceived by a number of men, the most important being Paul as narrator. He constructs the world of the text in the limited view of a young middle-class male. At the beginning of the novel, Paul and Holdsworth are the two men, who with the (masculine) railway, penetrate this old world of (feminine) nature, the ebb and flow of the seasons, the regularity of work imposed by and in harmony with the needs of the natural order of planting and harvest. Holdsworth, as critics agree, is no villain. An attractive, charming, travelled man, he is of another order than the staunchly religious, isolated, almost naïve Holmans. What links them, to begin with, masking his shallowness and their integrity, is a common interest in the world of books, and his fascination with the ways of the farm. It is not only Phillis, but her father, who finds Holdsworth puzzling, but stimulating, company, as Paul had already been won over earlier.

Paul, the narrator, is another kind of man. Young and inexperienced, a product of his upbringing, at first he insists on reading Phillis in terms of the ideology of the domestic ideal, and yet is intrigued, indeed intimidated, because she cannot fit into its limited boundaries. His first sight of her places her under the spotlight, as Mary Barton was placed by Gaskell at the trial:

a tall girl, about my own age, as I thought, came and opened [the door], and stood there silent, waiting to know my errand. I see her now - cousin Phillis. The westering sun shone full upon her, and made a slanting stream of light into the room within. She was dressed in dark blue cotton of some kind; up to her throat, down to her wrists, with a little frill of the same wherever it touched her

white skin. And such a white skin as it was! I have never seen the like. She had light hair, nearer yellow than any other colour. She looked at me steadily in the face, with large, quiet eyes, wondering, but untroubled by the sight of a stranger. I thought it odd that so old, so full-grown as she was, she should wear a pinafore over her gown. (226)

This passage exemplifies many of Paul's concerns, which shape the way he "reads" his cousin. In the first place he is aware of her difference. She, in her unself-consciousness, is unlike other, presumably urban, young women that he knows. At the same time he perceives her physical attractiveness. Once again, as with Thornton's admiration of Margaret Hale's physical appearance, Gaskell uses a male consciousness to describe a woman in physical detail. However, with Paul, his own immaturity precludes his seeing Phillis's sexual attractiveness. Instead he calls attention to their ages, which he mentions several times in these opening pages. This serves not only to highlight Phillis's age, and her inappropriately childish clothes, but also to make the reader aware of Paul's own youthfulness, inexperience, and therefore, limited perspective. The passage shows too how Paul describes Phillis according to the only model he knows, that of the ideology of the feminine ideal. Phillis, at first sight, is the angel in the house, silent and radiant. He sees her as her mother's "handmaiden", a term which neatly encompasses both the biblical patriarchal establishment of the Holmans, and the newly emerging, urban, role for women, of which he, not she, is aware:

I felt as if I were somebody in the Old Testament - who I could not recollect - being served and waited upon by the daughter of the host. Was I like Abraham's steward, when Rebecca gave him to drink at the well? I thought Isaac had not gone the pleasantest way to work in winning him a wife. But Phillis never thought about such things. She was a stately, gracious young woman, in the dress and with the simplicity of a child. (228)

As Paul leaves on this first visit, once again Phillis is placed under the spotlight: "Inside the house sate [*sic*] cousin Phillis, her golden hair, her dazzling complexion, lighting up the corner of the vine-shadowed room" (228). In Gaskell's earlier novels her heroines' stories enact what Nina Auerbach describes as "those points in the life cycle where the self grows into its identity, shaping potentially dangerous volatility into uniform integrity".¹⁴ However, in Phillis's case, her potential is limited by the shaping of the male narrator. Paul, the new industrial middle-class man, allows only a narrow selection of roles for Phillis. He sees her in terms of child, handmaiden, wife, in and of the domestic sphere, ignoring, indeed ignorant of, the potential of her sexuality.

Phillis's behaviour is presented as innocent and unselfconscious, guileless and in tune with nature. However, it is not long before we realize that Paul, if not innocent, is decidedly ignorant. The relationship he establishes with Phillis is the non-sexualized one of siblings. Although he mildly flirts with the idea of love, Paul finds Phillis's frankness too daunting:

I comforted myself immediately, however, by finding out that the grapes were sour. A great tall girl in a pinafore, half a head taller than I was, reading books that I had never heard of, and talking about them too, as of far more interest than any mere personal subjects; that was the last day on which I ever thought of my dear cousin Phillis as the possible mistress of my heart and life. But we were all the greater friends for this idea being utterly put away and buried out of sight. (244)

There are, however, indications that he does not understand her, evidence that she escapes his narrow framework. In Paul's description of the living-room, the domestic heart of the house, he tries initially to allocate to the things he sees

¹⁴ Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 17.

there their underlying masculine or feminine association. He soon finds that this is not as easy an exercise as it seems:

There were baskets of white-work about, and a small shelf of books hung against the wall, books used for reading, and not for propping up a beau-pot of flowers. I took down one or two of those books once when I was left alone in the house-place on the first evening - Virgil, Caesar, a Greek grammar - oh, dear! ah, me! and Phillis Holman's name in each of them! I shut them up, and put them back in their places, and walked as far away from the bookshelf as I could. Yes, and I gave my cousin Phillis a wide berth, although she was sitting at her work quietly enough, and her hair was looking more golden, her eyelashes longer, her round pillar of a throat whiter than ever. (235)

For the most part, Phillis is silenced by the imposition of the male narrative voice. Yet when she does speak there is the feeling that she may be wiser and more perceptive than Paul gives her credit for. He finds it difficult to converse with her at first, and they almost quarrel when he initiates conversation by asking a question to which he obviously knows the answer. She teases him "gravely". At this point they ask each other their ages. Paul asserts his masculine authority, "I am nineteen. Older than you by nearly two years". Phillis, however, responds "quietly", "I should not have thought you were above sixteen" (240). The whole incident, though slight, and used by Paul to show them warily progressing towards friendship, is important for it allows Phillis a voice. Her grave summing up of the situation, and her quiet assertion that Paul seemed younger than she, indicates that we must always be wary of Paul's reading of Phillis.

Nevertheless, Paul is not entirely unperceptive. He recognizes Phillis's similarity to her father, "so like him as she was both in body and mind" (236), and the problem caused in the family by their common interests. When Paul's father is describing a new model for the turnip-cutting machine, Phillis's father

listens, "almost unconscious of Phillis, leaning over and listening greedily, with her hand on his shoulder, sucking in information like her father's own daughter". Phillis's avidity for learning and her closeness to her father means that she has escaped the narrow world of her mother, who is "completely unable to understand the pleasure her husband and daughter took in intellectual pursuits" (249), and thus marginalized in their company. To Paul, Cousin Holman is "a purely motherly woman, whose intellect had never been cultivated, and whose loving heart entirely occupied with her husband, her child, her household affairs, and, perhaps, a little with the concerns of the members of her husband's congregation, because they, in a way, belonged to her husband" (271). Paul perceives how Holman is aware of this and how he attempts to compensate for such exclusion. Nevertheless such incidents mark Phillis's distance not only from her mother, who feels her daughter might be "a fitter companion for her husband than she was", but also from her father. Alike in their interests they may be, but he is "almost unconscious of her" (249).

Phillis's being like her father, and "more like a man than a woman" (251), is read by John Kucich as "masculinity", as being part of the sexual inversion Gaskell frequently uses in her novels to be seen as abnormal and unnatural, a pathology which reinforces the "ideological necessity of 'normal' sexual difference".¹⁵ In contrast to Phillis, Kucich sees Paul as being "unmanly", and even Holdsworth as "partially femininized". Although there is textual evidence for the latter - Kucich points out that Holdsworth is "almost like a girl" (256) in his illness - it might be remarked that these are Holdsworth's words about himself, and could be taken, as so much of what Holdsworth does say, as fallible. For Kucich, Gaskell, proving her fundamental conservatism, links femininity with duplicity and "these two problematically gendered men blunder into a

¹⁵ Kucich 189.

romantic deception that breaks the heart of the straightforward, masculinized Phillis".¹⁶ Certainly, as we have seen in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell can find the attribution of masculine traits to her heroines problematic, but this seems to be less so as her work progresses. Kucich's argument rests on an interpretation of such characters as being "starkly polarized inversions", where "women are rigidly masculinized, and men rigidly feminized, in static and stereotypic ways".¹⁷ I would argue that this rigidity is lacking in Gaskell's work. It is Holdsworth's masculine appeal that attracts Phillis, both in physical terms, and in his access to the public realm of words and knowledge. The latter are the very things she turns to her father for, and which he too seeks in his friendship with Holdsworth. What puzzles Paul is not her "masculinity", but her mixed character, and he struggles initially, as we have seen, to confine her to the very stereotype of which Kucich accuses Gaskell, where such traits are rigidly separated into their respective spheres. Paul, in fact, shows some maturity in recognizing that Phillis is not the kind of wife he wishes for, and it is hard to see their friendship as a thwarted love affair, where the sexual inversions keep them divided, an example, as Kucich would argue, of how "Gaskell's plots always pressure us into seeing these divisions as unnatural and often as regrettable".¹⁸ When Paul chooses a wife, he will not look to a woman who would take an interest in his work but one of "Ellison's lasses" who may not be "in the mechanical line" (250), as his father remarks. Paul is part of the modern middle-class industrial world where his wife, not expected to take a direct interest in the firm, will be free to focus her "time and attention more exclusively on hearth, husband and children".¹⁹

¹⁶ Kucich 191.

¹⁷ Kucich 188.

¹⁸ Kucich 189.

¹⁹ Davidoff and Hall 56.

Paul's father, however, as another representative of the urban, technology-based, industrial middle-class man, would confine Phillis even further. Unlike Paul, who struggles to come to terms with it, or uses it to emphasize Phillis's difference from "normal" women, his father entirely discounts Phillis's learning. He would see her entirely in terms of the ideology of the domestic sphere, as evidenced when Paul explains why he could never marry Phillis:

"Father," said I, "if I fancied Phillis ever so much, she would never fancy me. I like her as much as I could like a sister; and she likes me as if I were her brother - her younger brother ... You see she's so clever - she's more like a man than a woman - she knows Latin and Greek."

"She'd forget 'em, if she'd a houseful of children," was my father's comment on this.

"But she knows many a thing besides, and is wise as well as learned; she has been so much with her father. She would never think much of me, and I should like my wife to think a deal of her husband."

"... a scholar - but that can't be helped, and is more her misfortune than her fault, seeing she is the only child of a scholar - and as I said afore, once she's a wife and a mother she'll forget it all, I'll be bound." (251-252)

Thus side by side in the text, we have both the typical and the atypical, the model and the exception, presented at the same time, through having Paul as narrator both to describe and to interpret the situation. In trying to construct Phillis in terms of the angel or the lady, or even the child of nature, Paul is uneasy because her height, her manner and her learning differentiate her from this stereotype. She is always in excess of the ideology. Phillis and her growth to maturity are, to reiterate Patsy Stoneman's words, "the one unassimilated factor" in the new ideology of the separate spheres.²⁰

²⁰ Stoneman 161.

"The one unassimilated factor" might also be described as the problem of Phillis's sexuality. As already mentioned, Paul details Phillis's physical attractiveness without initially being aware of her sexual attractiveness. The obstacle to this would appear to be Phillis's pinafores, which have generally been interpreted as the means by which Phillis has been kept infantilized, the way in which her parents are unaware of her growth from girl- to womanhood. Paul himself thinks the pinafores look "odd" on one so old (226), and is quick to remark when she leaves off wearing them:

the course of life there was so peaceful and quiet, that I can only remember one small event, and that was one that I think I took more notice of than any one else: Phillis left off wearing the pinafores that had always been so obnoxious to me; I do not know why they were banished, but on one of my visits I found them replaced by pretty linen aprons in the morning, and a black silk one in the afternoon. (247)

Once again we are left in silence as to Phillis's own thoughts on this step to maturity. Paul claims the authority of having taken "more notice than any one else", but that claim in itself is open to question. Just prior to this comment he had described going to chapel with the Holmans, stressing not the sermon, but his cousin Phillis in a great deal of detail, since "I could see some of the young fellows we met cast admiring looks on Phillis; and that made me look too". He is unsure whether Phillis notices such admiration, but he suspects her mother does, "for she looked as fierce and as proud as ever her quiet face could look, guarding her treasure, and yet glad to perceive that others could see that it was a treasure" (246). Paul always seems to need to see other men noticing Phillis to be aware of her sexuality. When Holdsworth describes her as a beautiful woman, Paul mentally exclaims:

Woman! beautiful woman! I had thought of Phillis as a comely but awkward girl; and I could not banish the pinafore from my mind's eye when I tried to picture her again. (261)

Gaskell, therefore, uses Paul to record not only his, but other male perceptions of Phillis. But always Phillis remains as an object. The female world and the motivation behind the banishing of the pinafores is closed to Paul, and so is silenced in the text. In saying that he noticed more than anyone else, we must presume he noticed more than her father, since it has already been indicated that the women were aware of Phillis's value as a "treasure". Her father's unconsciousness of her in a physical sense, and her mother's (and, as we find out later, the servant Betty's) awareness of her maturity, indicate the division in Phillis, or rather in Paul's gendered construction of her, between the male world of the intellect and the search for knowledge and the female world of the body. Her mother's understanding, limited in the intellectual sphere, manifests itself in touch and silent sympathy. When Phillis has almost reached the climax of her own silent anguish, Paul watches as "her hand stole into her mother's, and how this latter fondled it with quiet caresses ..." (297).

Knowledge and desire: textuality and sexuality

As in Gaskell's other works, in *Cousin Phillis* too, women's sexuality is linked with silence and with illness. Phillis undergoes two stages of illness. However, she does not follow the pattern of decline suffered by Mary, Margaret, and Molly. Since she is observed from outside, we do not know the inner pain and turmoil, and her illness does not appear to contain that element of self-sacrifice, that they, under the domestic ideal, have been educated in. Phillis's "self" has already been sacrificed to the contingencies of the male narrator. Through his eyes, her illness appears to be much more like a conventional "love sickness", although we can see as well her awareness of sexuality which the other heroines also had to come to terms with. The first stage of her illness is closer to a general decline, called to Paul's attention by the village women, after

Holdsworth leaves for Canada. She recovers from this when Paul tells her of Holdsworth's love. The second more violent illness occurs after the news of Holdsworth's marriage, and is unusual in Gaskell's works in that it is named, as brain fever, a known disease with its own recognized pathological course. According to Audrey C. Petersen, this illness occurred frequently in the nineteenth-century novel because "the combination of emotional cause and physical effect made brain fever attractive to the novelist, according to the needs of the specific work".²¹ Brain fever seems particularly appropriate in Phillis's case, therefore, because of the dual nature of her desire, for both the love and the knowledge that Holdsworth might provide. It was thought that "the passionate, the studious, and those whose nervous system is weak, are very liable to it", and both physicians and laymen in the nineteenth century believed that "emotional shock or excessive intellectual activity could produce a severe and prolonged fever".²² The disease, in fact, suits Phillis's disposition.

As with Gaskell's other heroines, silence is the key word during the course of Phillis's illness. There is no language for a woman to express her sexuality, since it is apparently non-existent, and as Patsy Stoneman points out, this silence is part of a girl's prescribed innocence.²³ However, I would not agree with Stoneman that this silence is Phillis's denial of her sexuality. Paul as narrator is also contained by the silence which surrounds that sexuality; he struggles to express what Phillis might be feeling, and ends up suppressing these feelings

²¹ Audrey C. Petersen, "Brain Fever in Nineteenth-Century Literature: Fact and Fiction", *Victorian Studies* 19 (1975-76): 464. Petersen's account does not differentiate according to gender, nor does she discuss the links of the illness with women's sexuality, despite her use of the elder Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* and Emma Bovary as examples of emotional or passionate women who suffer brain fever.

²² Petersen 449.

²³ Stoneman 164.

within the text.²⁴ When the news of Holdsworth's departure for Canada is announced, Phillis's lack of comment is itself commented on:

"To Canada!" said the minister.
 "Gone away!" said his wife.
 But no word from Phillis. ... Phillis got up and left the room with
 noiseless steps. (277)

The silence becomes almost a battle of wills between the two cousins, yet remains wordless on the one subject of interest to them both:

down came Phillis - her face white and set, her dry eyes looking defiance to me, for I am afraid I hurt her maidenly pride by my glance of sympathetic interest as she entered the room. Never a word did she say - never a question did she ask about the absent friend, yet she forced herself to talk. (278)

Phillis's link with Holdsworth, the individual attention he has given her, has centred around words and knowledge. Straightforward and candid herself, she has found his teasing and badinage puzzling but fascinating, an attraction felt by the whole family for his exotic anecdotes of another wider world. Holman exclaims that "I thought in my vanity of censorship that his were not true and sober words; they would not have been if I had used them, but they were so to a man of his class perceptions", and shows his admiration for "the quick wits, bright senses, and ready words of Holdsworth" (290). Yet although Holdsworth's use of words is never straightforward, he has provided, through translation, the key for Phillis to the books that had escaped her, the objects of her passion: "he directed her studies in new paths, he patiently drew out the expression of many of her thoughts, and perplexities, and unformed theories" (271). Portrayed by

²⁴ It might be pointed out that, ironically, Gaskell too, by her choice of narrator, silences Phillis. However, as I argue elsewhere, Gaskell was constrained, with or without a male narrator, and it is with the woman author's manoeuvrability within these constraints that her works are concerned.

Paul as the young girl in tune with nature and the daily rural routine, Phillis's intense desire to learn appears strange to Paul. Her frustration at the difficulty of reading Dante comes across to him as an "impetuosity of tone" as she declares "paring apples is nothing, if I could only make out this old Italian" (243).

Thomas Recchio has recently argued persuasively that Phillis's love of Holdsworth "leads, if not to an open loss of virtue, to a loss of innocence of mind".²⁵ Taking the theme of Eden and the Fall, he discusses the way in which Carlyle reformulates Milton's version of the myth, and its implications for Gaskell's novel.²⁶ For Carlyle, the Edenic state of primal wholeness was shattered by mankind's curiosity, attainment of knowledge, and consequent acquisition of self-consciousness. This fall he describes in the language of illness: "the beginning of Inquiry is Disease".²⁷ Following this, Recchio claims that Phillis's search for knowledge

leads her in imagination to a place the antithesis of Hope Farm, Dante's hell. There are the seeds of quiet rebellion here, reflective of a present suffocating domesticity and the prelude to a transference of loyalties from the parental home to the world beyond where through suffering one finds one's place. Since Holdsworth is the key to unlock the knowledge that Phillis so desires, he becomes the focus of Phillis's transference of loyalty, leading her into a kind of emotional hell.²⁸

But although Recchio's argument is persuasive, what he ignores are issues of gender and sexuality. In describing Phillis as "a kind of Everywoman", "an edenic figure", and "both a pastoral maiden and a Victorian child-angel", he appears to stress the feminine aspect of her nature.²⁹ Yet if we are to see her as

²⁵ Thomas E. Recchio, "A Victorian Version of the Fall: Mrs Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis* and the Domestication of Myth", *The Gaskell Society Journal* 5 (1991) 44.

²⁶ See also Stoneman 159-160, for a summary of other critical interpretations of *Cousin Phillis* as part of the Eden-Fall tradition.

²⁷ Thomas Carlyle, "Characteristics", quoted Recchio 38.

²⁸ Recchio 44.

²⁹ Recchio 39, 40.

"Everywoman", then this precludes any universality, for with the gendered experience of the separate spheres, her life cannot be that of "Everyman"; she simply cannot move "to the world beyond". As well, what Paul (and Gaskell) stress in the text is Phillis's difference, the way in which she does not fit the pattern of the model young woman. Paul's initial construction of her as angel in the house is soon disrupted. So although Recchio would argue that Phillis's story could be reflective of the myth of the Fall, "perceived as a pattern of the natural processes involved in human growth", I would stress that Gaskell is presenting a gendered, and therefore limited, account. Paul's fall into knowledge in the story, is different from Phillis's. His is a loss of innocence and a growth in self-knowledge which do not involve illness, and leave him in control of words. His verbal authority in and over the text constantly counterpoints the silencing of Phillis.

Paul's "fall" from innocence is not usually noted in other critical interpretations of *Cousin Phillis*. Most dismiss him as the vehicle of narration, "a peculiarly substanceless, unattractive young man through whose naïve consciousness the tale is told", "socially inept", "the unmanly narrator".³⁰ But, like Holdsworth, his words disrupt the fragile stability of life at Hope Farm, as Phillis's silence disrupts the seeming stability of Paul's text. He learns too late that he too can inflict pain and suffering, and that, unlike Holdsworth, who is unconscious of the pain he has caused, he must live with the consequences. For although the tale is told in retrospect, and appears to reflect a "naïve consciousness", we are always being reminded that there is a future beyond the end of the text. It is the older, wiser Paul who controls the retrospective account, and who must gradually come to terms with what he has done. Although Betty might mistakenly think that "it would need be a deaf adder to be taken in wi'

³⁰ Recchio 39; Stoneman 164; Kucich 191.

your words, though there may be no great harm in 'em" (299), Paul knows that what he initially dismisses as "that blunder", "one little half-hour's indiscretion" (293), has caused irreparable damage to Phillis and the Holman household. His words have brought to Paul, himself, self-reproach and remorse, and to the household secrecy and concealment, a corruption of their previous open ways:

Until now everything which I had heard spoken in that happy household were simple words of true meaning. If we had aught to say, we said it; and if any one preferred silence, nay if all did so, there would have been no spasmodic, forced efforts to talk for the sake of talking, or to keep off intrusive thoughts or suspicions. (302)

To Phillis his words bring happiness then pain, desire then shame, life then near death, and ultimately complete silence.

The one area which challenges Paul's authority over words is Phillis's love, her desire for Holdsworth, that area of female sexuality which is nameless. If she is silent on the matter, as she must be, he too finds difficulty in articulation. Initially his silence is part of his lack of perception. He is perplexed, for example, when Phillis cannot bear Holdsworth's close scrutiny as he sketches her: "she never gave any explanation of her rush out of the room" (272). But the older narrating Paul plots the growth of their growing awareness of their attraction as a series of small incidents fitting into the natural passage of time and traditional rural activities: the storm at haymaking, the portrait at harvest-time. According to Stoneman the storm could be an analogy for the sexual attraction between Phillis and Holdsworth.³¹ The idyllic pastoral world of Hope Farm is attractive because of its Edenic qualities, yet Eden was lost when Eve became aware of sexual shame. Thus for Stoneman, not only does Paul not understand that Phillis's love is "inconsistent with her 'innocence'", but Phillis's closeness to the

³¹ Stoneman 163.

natural world is bought at the cost of her individuality.³² Certainly, as Stoneman further points out, theological, pastoral and Romantic tradition all encourage the association of women with nature, and Paul, writing within this tradition, so constructs his cousin Phillis. But in doing so he unintentionally problematizes her sexuality: by Paul's association of Phillis with nature, and his linking of the progress of her love with the cycle of the natural order, either her sexuality is "naturalized", seen as part of nature, or denied, silenced as inadmissible in the context of the natural innocence of her love.

Once Holdsworth has left, even the younger Paul begins to notice a difference in his cousin and to search for the words to describe her condition: "My eye caught on Phillis, looking so pale and weary, and with a sort of aching tone (*if I may call it so*) in her voice. She was doing all the accustomed things - fulfilling small household duties, but somehow differently - *I can't tell you how*, for she was just as deft and quick in her movements, only the light spring was gone out of them" (279, emphases added). And even when Paul finally realizes Phillis's feelings for Holdsworth, it is indirectly through Holdsworth's words, not hers. He comes across her, crying, and trying to read: "Had I done anything to vex her? No: she was crying before I came in. I went to look at her book - one of those unintelligible Italian books. I could make neither head nor tail of it. I saw some pencil-notes on the margin, in Holdsworth's handwriting". Paul is unable to read either Italian or Phillis; as a young man, his is a limited perception, part of the silencing of Phillis in the text. We seldom hear any of her actual words. She has just told him "I cannot bear it!" (282) and yet he still does not understand until he sees the handwriting: "Could that be it? Could that be the cause of her white looks, her weary eyes, her wasted figure, her struggling sobs?" (283).

³² Stoneman 164, 165.

Phillis's illness therefore can be traced to two causes, both represented by Holdsworth. He attracts her by his physicality, but also by his learning. As has been already said, he gives her a key to language, but not everyday language, or one which might explain her condition. Her father teaches her dead languages, although he still upholds them as living truths. Holdsworth brings her from *L'Inferno* to *I Promessi Sposi*, hell to betrothal, the human condition to romantic love. Although he never physically touches her, his presence has awakened her sexual desire, and his writing on her books has constantly acted as a reminder of this intrusion. Paul makes the connection between his textual and sexual advances explicit when Holdsworth first glosses Phillis's work, before she has given him permission: "I was not sure if he was not taking a liberty; it did not quite please me, and yet I did not know why" (262). Yet Paul too takes liberties and his anxiety over the textual/sexual connection between Holdsworth and Phillis could stem from a displacement of his own guilt. Not only does he betray her, but he attempts to embody her in his own text.

Nevertheless, in his attempt, Paul is often at a loss for words. Sometimes this lack of a direct vocabulary for a discourse of women's sexuality not based on its transformation into maternal desire comes from its very unnameability. "I would not betray my guesses, my surmises, my all but certain knowledge of the state of her heart. ... I think that as soon as she felt pretty sure of there being no recurrence, either by word, look, or allusion, to the one subject that was predominant in her mind, she came back to her old sisterly ways with me" (288). He finds it impossible to let Holdsworth know about what he has done, especially since he already entertains doubts about his actions, and feels "more scruple in revealing what I had found out or guessed at of Phillis's secret than in repeating to her his spoken words". Because her love has not been, and cannot be, named, such expression is silenced, and as the woman is only the object of and not the perpetrator of love, then Paul cannot tell Holdsworth that which is

silence. "I did not think I had any right to say out to him what I believed - namely, that she loved him dearly, and had felt his absence even to the injury of her health" (287).

But at other times, Paul indulges in a narrative coyness as if a woman's declarations are too private to be revealed, and that the reader must imagine for himself. He decides to leave the matter alone and not tell Holdsworth: "As she had told me she should like to hear all the details and fuller particulars and more explicit declarations first from him, so he should have the pleasure of extracting the delicious tender secret from her maidenly lips" (287). Paul falls back on romantic cliché; the point is that these secrets are never revealed to the reader. Once again there is a textual silencing of the woman's expression of love, passion and desire, a way of eliding or obscuring the fact that all there is is a silence; that there are no words to express such desires; that the woman as subject is an impossibility; and that Gaskell too as speaking subject was confined by the same impossibility: she could put the words into the mouth of a male character, but not express them for a female character and still keep the illusion of realism.

When Paul reports Phillis's own expression of her love of Holdsworth to him, he encounters the same problems. Either there is indirectness, euphemism or circumlocution, or Phillis's body becomes a text to be read, as Paul inscribes Phillis's feelings upon her body as Holdsworth inscribed his words on her books. Just before Paul tells Phillis of Holdsworth's love, he finds her in her childhood retreat behind the woodstack, as if she is wanting to retreat from this new adult state of recognition of her own sexuality, in a return to innocence. Her grief is constructed by Paul as in tune with nature, but it is also wordless, a mere noise: "She was making a low moan, like an animal in pain, or perhaps more like the

sobbing of the wind" (283).³³ Paul, on the other hand, has access to language, with the possibility of repeating Holdsworth's words, and thus can "assuage" her suffering: "I felt as if I ought to beg her pardon for my necessarily authoritative words" (284). Her reaction is termed in a mixture of broken expressions, a searching for words, and in the way Paul "reads" her body:

"Don't," said she, almost gasping out the word, which she had tried once or twice before to speak; but her voice had been choked. Now she put her hand backwards; she had quite turned away from me, and felt for mine. She gave it a soft lingering pressure; and then she put her arms down on the wooden division, and laid her head on it, and cried quiet tears. ... She lifted up her head and looked at me. Such a look! Her eyes, glittering with tears as they were, expressed an almost heavenly happiness; her tender mouth was curved with rapture - her colour vivid and blushing; but as if she was afraid her face expressed too much, more than thankfulness to me she was essaying to speak, she hid it again almost immediately. ...

"Don't," she said. She still kept her face covered and hidden. In half a minute she added, in a very low voice, "Please, Paul, I think I would rather not hear any more - I don't mean but what I have - but what I am very much obliged - Only - only, I think I would rather hear the rest from himself when he comes back. ... Paul, please, we won't speak about *that* again." (285-6, emphasis in original)

Paul's own ambivalent feelings about Phillis's sexuality and his part in its acknowledgement are clear. He is easier when the situation appears to return to "normal", when, in fact, Phillis does not show him these signs to be read: "putting her hand in mine just as if we were two children ..." (286); "she came back to her old sisterly ways with me" (287).

³³ Her voiceless grief, although "natural" contrasts markedly with her "healthy" imitation of birdsong when she learns of Holdsworth's love. It is closer to the breakdown of language she experiences during her brain fever, when in trying to hold on to the symbolic, the language of the Father, she is reduced to a non-language state of moans and wordless noises: "trying in the old accustomed way to croon out a hymn tune, but perpetually breaking it up into moans of pain" (311).

Phillis and truth: how to read the future

It is in Paul's ambivalence, and in the play of illness and health, that the problems surrounding Phillis's sexuality are focussed. Despite the ultimate silencing of Phillis, and Paul's desire to desexualize her, to return her to sister and child, Phillis's desire emerges as "healthy". The suppression or lack of acknowledgement of that desire brings illness, both when Holdsworth first goes to Canada, and then when he marries. In between these times her knowledge of Holdsworth's love brings "blooming looks"; the knowledge had "quickened her heart into renewed life and vigour" and "her bright healthy appearance was remarked upon" (287). Phillis is constructed by Paul as being in a state even closer to nature, radiant, warbling and whistling with the birds, and even though this is based on his desire to stress her innocence, her "natural simple goodness and wisdom" (290), what Paul cannot suppress is the reader's knowledge that her happiness and health are bound up in her acceptance of her own desires, when she loves and feels that love reciprocated: "her state of vivid happiness this summer was markedly different from the peaceful serenity of former days. If in my thoughtfulness at noticing this I caught her eye, she blushed and sparkled all over, guessing that I was remembering our joint secret. Her eyes fell before mine, as if she could hardly bear me to see the revelation of their bright glances" (291).

Illness returns when the reciprocity of her desire is denied. Paul announces Holdsworth's marriage to her as a thunder-storm breaks and from then on Phillis's actions are disjointed and her disharmony is accentuated. Always silenced by the text, she is now more silent in the text, although when she does speak Paul notes "a new, sharp, discordant sound" in her voice, "a sort of jangle in her tone" (296); hers is "a sharp voice, out of tune" (302); and Betty tells Paul how she hears Phillis walking about at night, unable to speak. Her disturbed

state of mind is shown through her actions as much as her words that Paul records:

I suppose the monotonous chant [of her father's reading] irritated Phillis to some irregular energy, for I remember the quick knotting and breaking of the thread with which she was sewing. I never heard that snap repeated now, without suspecting some sting or stab troubling the heart of the worker. Cousin Holman, at her peaceful knitting, noticed the reason why Phillis had so constantly to interrupt the progress of her seam. "It is bad thread, I'm afraid," she said, in a gentle sympathetic voice. But it was too much for Phillis. "The thread is bad - everything is bad - I'm so tired of it all!" And she put down her work, and hastily left the room. I do not suppose that in all her life Phillis had ever shown so much temper before. (296)

During this time Paul appears at his most patronizing. Suffering for his indiscretion, his misuse of words, he feels "all I could do now was to second the brave girl in her efforts to conceal her disappointment and keep her maidenly secret" (302). We are left wondering what Paul's purpose is in relating this story in the first place. Is it to tell the tale of his cousin's sad love affair, or to absolve his guilt in the part he played? He would see it as a search for "truth". When Holman finally finds out about his daughter's feelings he blames Paul for marring her innocence, and putting "such thoughts into the child's head", spoiling "her peaceful maidenhood with talk about another man's love" (307). Even though Phillis defends his actions and declares her own desire, and though Holman feels he was unjust to blame Paul entirely, Paul remarks:

I could not help remembering the pinafore, the childish garment which Phillis wore so long, as if her parents were unaware of her progress towards womanhood. Just in the same way the minister spoke and thought of her now, as a child, whose innocent peace I had spoiled by vain and foolish talk. I knew that the truth was different, though I could hardly have told it now; but, indeed, I never thought of trying to tell. (307)

Thus the narrative could be taken as Paul's attempt to reveal the truth years later. However, in the will to truth, he is also able to reconstruct his past, assuage his guilt, and to control his cousin and the anxieties she invoked, once and for all.

Phillis asks to leave at the end. Knowledge drives her out of Eden; but at the same time she must go beyond the narrow confines of her father's world to the new urban industrial order, Paul's family home. There is no guarantee, however, that she will have less confinement there; indeed she may have more, since Paul's father has already indicated that he has very narrow views on what constitutes womanly behaviour. The tragedy for Phillis is not her loss of love, but that the intrusion of Holdsworth into her life may, in fact, take her from the old world order of Hope Farm to the unnamed, undescribed future of the new bourgeois industrial order represented by Paul and his father. Both of these locations offer a limited life for Phillis, and in both she is the object of male perception, the subject of male myth. Although Holdsworth believes she inhabits the narrow circle of the Sleeping Beauty castle, from her point of view her home has at least allowed her an education different from most other young women of her age. Nevertheless, her awakened desire for knowledge has been bought at the cost of her being perceived only as a child by her father, and for Phillis, the name of Hope Farm is ironic, for the possibilities of being a "whole woman" there are severely circumscribed. In Birmingham, she will live with the Mannings, not bad men but intent on "manning" their universe, where women have a distinct and limited role. And in the end Holdsworth proves also to have a limited perspective. To him all women are objects to admire and to love perhaps, but are ultimately not individuals, one being able to be substituted for another, a Lucy for a Phillis.

Kate Ellis, in looking at preindustrial and early industrial readings of Milton's myth of Eden, would argue that early industrialism could not assume the link of God and nature that the older world assumed, that in fact this was being overthrown because of the push beyond the limits of nature. She claims that there was "a rejection of the distinctions ... that bound the workday to the "natural" demands of seedtime and harvest, daylight and darkness. Blake called the mills of his day Satanic, yet they were the basis of the very bourgeois prosperity that made possible the separation of the spheres".³⁴ In *Cousin Phillis* this shift could be seen in the way in which Hope Farm belongs to a Miltonic pre-industrial paradise, monitored by the turn of the seasons, which counterpoint the encroaching railway time of the novel. As the new industrial man Paul Manning is (re)constructing middle-class ideology and reinforcing the separation of the spheres, the new Ruskinian ideal of prelapsarian bliss centred on the domestic hearth around the new angel, the woman infantilized in her sphere. In his production and interpretation of his cousin Phillis, he must accommodate her into the new world order. And in doing so he silences her. During the course of the novel, Paul mentions future events concerning himself - his marriage to Margaret Ellison - and Holdsworth. But about Phillis there is nothing apart from the elusive "I sometimes grew desponding, and feared that she would never be what she had been before; no more she has, in some ways" (316).

Patsy Stoneman interprets the ending positively: "Phillis's last words, "I can, and I will!" suggest a concept of maturity independent of a prince, and not therefore put out of bounds by shame".³⁵ Yet the very lack of any future, the almost perverse silence of the text as to any continuing life for Phillis, seem to

³⁴ Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1989) 39.

³⁵ Stoneman 168.

deny this positive ending. The end is very open, and thus uninterpretable. Gaskell denies the closure of marriage, but at the same time does not suggest the openness of any alternative future. By tying down the text in Paul's voice we get a very ambivalent view of what life for an intelligent beautiful young woman might be; no easy answer is provided. The reader can find the quiet melancholy of a fall from pastoral innocence, or the subdued proclamation of independence of the last words. But these last words could be read as much in a tone of desperation as one of triumph.³⁶ Phillis's silencing in the text, both through the use of a male narrator and through the cultural silence imposed upon a young woman of her age and background, allows us no way of knowing her apart from the implications in the discrepancies between what Paul reports her as saying and what he interprets her words and actions to mean. His limited perspective and understanding mean that Phillis is never really present; she is always marginalized and hidden under the cloud of Paul's ideological constructs and his need to reshape her story to accommodate his own ambivalent emotions. Unlike the strong Margaret Hale, and the to-be-contented Molly Gibson, Phillis is left for us in some kind of limbo, a sphere of her own, neither infantilized angel nor angel in the house, neither happy girl nor fulfilled wife, and any other possible roles are equally lacking. *Cousin Phillis*, therefore, is far more tragic than it first appears. In this novel which looks nostalgically at the fading of the rural harmonies of man and nature in face of the invading forces of the industrial world, a fading which does not mean obliteration so much as change, the new world order appears to be one for men - Holman, the whole man, who can bridge the old and the new; Holdsworth, an upperclass educated man of the

³⁶ Pearl L. Brown reads the ending, with Phillis's leaving for Birmingham, positively: "If there will be pain and loss for Phillis, at least there will be growth and perhaps a sense of selfhood with that growth. The anti-pastoral change, for Phillis is affirmative". Pearl L. Brown, "The Pastoral and Anti-pastoral in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis*", *The Victorian Newsletter* 82 (1992): 22-27. I cannot agree with this, for I perceive both the pastoral and anti-pastoral, in Brown's argument, to be constraints upon women, confined in differing constructs of femininity: the feminine as nature and landscape, or as the domestic myth.

world with the eye of an engineer and artist; and the upwardly mobile Mannings, who are fashioning the new world with their technology and industry. Women's place in the new order is secondary, curtailed, limited to only one aspect of their nature, as Phillis is limited and circumscribed by her father's, Manning's, Holdsworth's, and Paul's perceptions of her, denied her own voice, her story relayed through the voice of a man. She remains forever the relative creature of domestic ideology: *Cousin Phillis*.

Chapter 9

Molly Gibson: Challenging the Word of the Father?

There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 ¹

"It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it, I might as well never have lived."

Molly Gibson.

Molly was silent. ... She kept silence, though she knew her father was expecting an answer.

"A child should be brought up with its parents, if it is to think them infallible when it grows up."

Cynthia Kirkpatrick, in *Wives and Daughters* ²

Gaskell subtitled *Wives and Daughters* "An Everyday Story", and it is the very ordinariness of *Wives and Daughters* that could be claimed to be its most outstanding characteristic. Gaskell, in the heyday of the sensation novel, created a story which epitomized the mundanity of the domestic realm.³ Its setting is rural not industrial, provincial not urban; there are no fires, strikes, or riots here, not even the storms of *Cousin Phillis*. At the centre of the ideology of the domestic sphere is the family; at the centre of the family is the mother; at the centre of the mother's desire the child. *Wives and Daughters* is about the emergence of the child, Molly, into womanhood - the growth from daughter to wife. Yet in this novel, the silence at the centre of the family and of the title is - the mother. Molly, in her transition, learns both silence and speaking, "the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses", as Gaskell herself shows that

¹ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 27.

² Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* 170, 210, 261. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

³ See Angus Easson ed., *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 471, 486, 525, 535-6, for contemporary reviews which valorize the "eternal truths" of this novel against the ephemeral triviality of sensation novels.

“speaking” at length about seemingly little is a strategy for making apparent the limited nature of women’s lives, for giving material form to that which is usually silenced and dismissed as “trivial”.

As in her other novels, in *Wives and Daughters* Gaskell literalizes the metaphor of self-sacrifice and metaphorizes illness, as Molly struggles to come to terms with being a woman, a speaking subject within an ideological structure that would wish to silence her and her desires. Patricia Meyer Spacks interprets the novel in a negative light, equating Molly’s denial with powerlessness. To Spacks, Molly’s story is “a sad parable”, where the language and structure “consistently emphasize Molly’s ineffectuality and its psychic costs, registered not in active rebellion but in a magnifying sense of dullness”.⁴ She would see Molly’s enculturation purely in terms of limitation:

the consistent association of separateness with sadness, the melancholy that attends the girl’s growth, her inability to take pleasure in her power, sexual or asexual: these conspicuous emotional facts support the view that *Wives and Daughters* depicts a youthful heroine who wishes most to remain a daughter, whose wifehood will amount to a version of daughterhood, whose shift of affection from father to lover seems more a necessity than a source of excitement.⁵

I would argue, however, that because Molly attempts to make sense of her world, to find her own speaking position and create her own moral order, Gaskell goes beyond the usual boundaries of the woman’s role. Admittedly, the roles available for Molly are limited to daughter, wife and mother, for Gaskell is far from revolutionary in this novel. Nevertheless, by questioning the ideology, and by subverting the ideal, Gaskell produces a new, though still limited, ideal in

⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea - Myths of Youth and Adolescent Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982) 41, 38.

⁵ Spacks 41.

its place, a new kind of wife, and, presumably, a new kind of mother. This results from Molly's learning process - learning how, when, and of what to speak, and also when to stay silent; not just "the intolerable discipline of refraining" but an active strategy in attaining self-hood.⁶

In the novels already discussed, silence is usually involved with the subject of women's sexuality, an unspeakable desire unless produced in terms of motherhood. The connection of sexuality and silence is also true of *Wives and Daughters*, but because this novel is concerned for a large part with families and parent-child relationships, silence is also caught up with filial obedience, the silence between generations, and the generation of secrecy. Molly's silence is often not so much a lack of voice as a choosing not to speak, not being silenced, but keeping silent. Molly, by keeping others' secrets, gains knowledge from their experiences, yet remains innocent herself. In Nina Auerbach's terms of theatricality, the secret dramas at which Molly assists are not so much other potential lives for her, but a medium through which she might learn about others' sexuality at the same time as almost wilfully not recognizing her own.⁷ While acting upon the wishes of others, she represses her own desires, and in the non-recognition of her own sexuality, a sexuality so apparent to the reader, she pays the price of such silence. In striving to behave according to the feminine ideal, to curb her tongue and confine her behaviour, Molly becomes ill. Like other Gaskell heroines before her, she must learn to steer a path between selflessness and selfishness. In short, she must learn to take care of her "self".

⁶ Spacks 40.

⁷ Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals* 17. Other potential lives for Molly are in the figures of Mrs Hamley and Mrs Gibson; see below. For Ruth Bernard Yeazell, both the narrator and Cynthia are used by Gaskell to maintain Molly's "modesty"; through narrative intrusion, Gaskell "manages to convey her heroine's responsiveness to the hero without implicating Molly herself in the knowledge", while Cynthia "engagingly fulfils her function as the heroine's immodest double, speaking the truth of Molly's desire at the moment when Molly herself must continue to deny it". Yeazell, *Fictions* 194, 195.

"Molly Gibson's Childhood": Disobedience and Order(s).

As a child Molly does not fit the pattern of the feminine girl. Like Margaret Hale, she is identified with the outdoors, accustomed to long walks, riding horses, and climbing trees. She is also shown to be outspoken and able to stand up for herself. On the other hand, she is educated to have a strong sense of moral behaviour, and to think of others before herself. It is important that Gaskell does not show these as naturally feminine traits, or innate to all women, as the ideology would construct the matter. Some men in the novel, such as Roger and Mr Gibson, also behave in such a way, and some women, notably Mrs Gibson and Cynthia, do not. But by learning such behaviour, Molly is potentially divided. There arises the possibility of her having to choose between what she thinks is right and disobeying her father, an internal conflict which unsettles the apparent stability of character established in her childhood, and enables her to emerge as her own "self" rather than the model her father might have wished to produce. Although Mr Gibson states "I want to keep her a child" (65), she progresses from the girl who admits "I'm only Molly Gibson" (53), to the young woman who can declare "when I want to be married, I'll not trouble mamma. I'll look out for myself" (681).

At the end of the novel, Mr Gibson is forced to acknowledge Molly's independence from him, that she is no longer a child, an acknowledgement that brings him some pain: "'Lover *versus* father!' thought he half sadly. 'Lover wins.' And he, too, became indifferent to all that remained of his dinner" (701). Yet in speaking of Molly to Roger he uses words which indicate his power as a father, that determine Molly, for all that he loves her dearly, as an object, something to be possessed, and thus in his power to be handed over to another owner:

"I suppose losing one's daughter is a necessary evil. Still ... it is but fair to you to say, I'd rather give my child - my only child, remember! - to you, than to any man in the world!" (700)

From Molly's childhood, through to her adulthood, this duality of love and power underlies her relationship with her father, a duality which is firmly established within the opening chapters. Their closeness gives Molly a stable world in which to grow up, despite the death of her mother, for her father is there as protector and confidant, an understanding companion. He is the first person to whom she turns and it is stressed that theirs is an "altogether confidential friendship" (64), although, of course, the confidences are Molly's. She can joke with him and feel comfortable "to know that I may be as rude as I like" (58). But at the same time she becomes distressed if she is too far from her father. When she believes she has to stay the night at the Towers, it is of her father that she thinks first. "'But papa!' sobbed out Molly. 'He always wants me to make tea for him.'" When her father arrives to collect her, their physical closeness is stressed:

She threw her arms around her father's neck. "Oh, papa, papa, papa! I am so glad you have come"; and then she burst out crying, stroking his face almost hysterically as if to make make sure he was there. (57)

She is open in her expression of affection, both in words and action. The need to touch, in fact, often replaces the need for words. When Mr Gibson first visits her at the Hamleys', though politeness makes him address Mrs Hamley, it is Molly who "stood by him, her hand on his shoulder", and when she needs reassurance, her hand "stole down into his, and nestled in that firm compact grasp" (109). At this stage, Molly would like to remain in this childhood world, attached to her father forever:

"Oh! I am so glad to feel you," squeezing his hand hard. "Papa, I should like to get a chain like Ponto's, just as long as your longest round, and then I could fasten us two to each end of it, and when I wanted you I could pull, and if you didn't want to come you could pull back again; but I should know you knew I wanted you, and we could never lose each other." (58)

Dr Gibson is a loving, caring parent who, though even to Molly, "in their most private moments, he did not give way to much expression of his feelings" (63), shows those feelings through his teasing, which is indulgent rather than unkind, his affectionate names, such as "goosey" (90), and his actions. He repeatedly finds excuses for Molly not to go to the Hamleys, though ironically for a man who prides himself on his rationality, "he could hardly have given his reasons for these refusals" (76). Nevertheless, for all his love, Dr Gibson has distinct ideas on Molly's upbringing and her role as a girl and daughter, and he is prepared to exercise his powers as a father to accomplish this. Even in the small matter of dress he shows that his will is to be followed. He refuses, probably wisely, Miss Browning's offer to lend Molly some beads because

he did not admire the Miss Brownings' taste in dress, and was unwilling to have his child decked up according to their fancy; he esteemed his old servant Betty's as the more correct, because the more simple. (42)

On the more important issue of education his ideas are even clearer. He engages a governess more for an observance of proprieties, so that Molly should not be left alone with his pupils (a tacit reference to her potential sexuality), than for any wish to see Molly educated. His instructions to Miss Eyre, though they could be read ironically, contain a truth. "Don't teach Molly too much; she must sew, and read, and write, and do sums; but I want to keep her a child" (65). This desire motivates him through much of the novel. It is only gradually that he perceives Molly has grown up despite his wishes and that his desire to keep her a

child, once a reflection of her own wish to remain a child, is no longer appropriate. The tension for Molly, of course, lies between being what she wants and what her father wants her to be. On the point of education Molly shows her will, and "by fighting and struggling hard" (65) persuades her father to extend her education beyond the basics.

Molly is affected by the insistence on correctness by her father, reinforced as it is by Betty and Miss Eyre. Miss Eyre's own notions of correctness are exemplified in her "beautifully written, beautifully worded, admirably folded, and most neatly sealed letter" to Dr Gibson (108), and, as a stranger to irony and an upholder of the symbolic order, she attempts to carry out his orders "to the letter".⁸ The child Molly is much troubled on her visit to the Towers by a feeling that she has somehow transgressed. She "could not keep from tormenting herself" (49) that Lady Cuxhaven thinks her greedy, and thought herself "a miserable sinner" for oversleeping when she "ought to have been awake" (53). Molly already has a sense of duty and proper behaviour in public, though her unwillingness to hold Mrs Kirkpatrick's hand when saying goodbye to Lady Cumnor indicates an ability to act for herself. Thus she both rebels against yet wishes for (patriarchal) order.

In psychoanalytic terms Molly's relationship with her father at the early stage of the novel can be seen to have two aspects. There is the closed, dyadic, mutual love between her and her father in his "maternal" function, symbolized by Molly's wish to have "a chain like Ponto's", a kind of umbilical cord to keep her tied to her father. Nevertheless he also plays the part of the symbolic father,

⁸ Margaret Homans dates Molly's "training in feminine selflessness" from when Roger finds her weeping over the news of her father's engagement (254), but, although she discusses the role of Miss Eyre at length (274-6), in relation to Gaskell's reading and rewriting of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and notes that Miss Eyre is "as servile to paternal law as any governess could be" (275), Homans does not note the "literality" of Miss Eyre's nature, nor the fact that she is the first pattern of feminine selflessness that Molly encounters.

the paternal authority, enforcer of law and order, socializing her in her female role.⁹ The former "imaginary" stage is shattered when the relationship becomes sexualized, on two counts. Firstly Mr Gibson intercepts Mr Coxe's love letter, and he

was startled at discovering that his little one was fast growing into a woman, and already the passive object of some of the strong interests that affect a woman's life; and he - her mother as well as her father - so much away that he could not guard her as he would have wished. (87)

Then, in order to "protect" her, he marries. Of her own sexual attractiveness, Molly is unaware, since she has no knowledge of why her father wishes suddenly to send her to the Hamleys', although she has begun to think about romantic attachments, as her daydreams about Osborne will show. But at the Hamleys' she is made aware of her father's sexuality when the possibility of his remarrying is mentioned. This idea presents itself as "a danger" which begins "to harass" her mind, spoil "the sweet peace of her final thoughts" and become "the unsatisfied question [which] rankled in her mind, and darted out of ambush to disturb her dreams" (101-2). Thus Molly's seeming stability of self is disrupted by unconscious fears and desires. From now on her apparently stable world will be filled with silences and secrets, reflected in her sense of violent dislocation when her father tells her he is to remarry. The previously outspoken Molly endures her first instance of silence:

She could not tell what words to use. She was afraid of saying anything, lest the passion of anger, dislike, indignation - whatever it was that was boiling up in her breast - should find vent in cries and screams, or worse in raging words that should never be forgotten. It was as if the piece of the solid ground on which she stood had

⁹ Margaret Homans gives the most extensive psychoanalytic reading of *Wives and Daughters*. See Chapter 10, "Mothers and Daughters II: *Wives and Daughters*, or 'Two Mothers'", 251-276. Yeazell, too, deals with issues of licit and illicit consciousness, Chapter 11, "Molly Gibson's Secrets", *Fictions* 194-216.

broken from the shore, and she was drifting out to the infinite sea alone. (145)

Molly's silence will grow as she tries to fashion her self in a world that grows increasingly unfamiliar. If the world of adolescence is one of change, for Molly these changes are externalized in a complete change in her life. After her father's remarriage, "on Tuesday afternoon Molly returned home - to the home which was already strange" (207). Her silence becomes a strategy as she comes to terms with the demands of filial obedience.

"Drifting into Danger": Parents, Authority, and Evolution

In 1864 an article entitled "To Parents" appeared in *All the Year Round*, in which were discussed the relative and reciprocal duties of parents and children. The writer of the article moves uneasily between the two positions, initially implying a modernity of thought in admitting that "amidst the universal preaching of the duties of children to parents, a few words might well be said on the duties of parents to children".¹⁰ Overall the article reinforces the ideals of parenthood as richer and more rewarding, in imagery which stresses the fertility of marriage rather than the sterility of single life; it assumes, as well as extols, the joys of the domestic hearth. Yet the tension that exists in the article is similar to that found in the works of Sarah Ellis, and lies in the unstated acknowledgement that this construction is an ideal which people do not reach. There is an unease about "breeding", a problem for the upwardly mobile, and the article participates in a middle-class construction of class based on manners, that is, on gentlemanly behaviour rather than birth. For the second or third generation of the new middle classes, "the traces of their [parents'] humble origin" are not to be

¹⁰ [---], "To Parents", *All the Year Round* 11 (July 9 1864): 512. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text, after the title "Parents".

disparaged by the children, but how should they bear "that ingrained coarseness of nature, not breeding, common to all ranks" ("Parents", 514)?

The kind of parents being targetted, therefore, is those who are fallible, and not necessarily the best guides for their children. The writer treats the subject cautiously and confidentially, as if reluctant to give authority to such claims: "But, alas, here intrudes a truth which should be touched reverently and delicately, and yet it cannot be passed over for it is a truth - that all parents are *not* wiser than their children" ("Parents", 513, emphasis in original). The overall implications of the article are, however, that the new mid-century generation of children are somehow better than many of their parents. The metaphors employed establish the opposition of expansion and limitation; the underlying reasons for the improvement are, by implication, social, cultural, educational, and, importantly, biological even evolutionary. These parents "may be very simple, common people: infirm in intellect, uneducated, unrefined: guilty of many short-comings of temper, judgment, and even glaring errors" ("Parents", 515). In some cases, "the elder generation is, in mental and moral calibre, decidedly inferior to the younger. Not bad people, but only narrow: narrow in thought, and word, and deed; unable to recognize that what lies beyond their own limited vision has any existence whatever". The problem for children arises "if nature has made one of their children in any way different from themselves, of larger mould and wider capacities" ("Parents", 514). Nevertheless, while at times seeming sympathetic to the children, the writer veers erratically in tone, and elsewhere sides with the parents, to the extent of appearing contradictory: "To this generation of Young England, which is apt to think so much of itself, and so little of its elders and superiors, we cannot too strongly uphold the somewhat out of date doctrine, 'Honour thy father and thy mother'" ("Parents", 515).

Filial obedience is, then, constructed as an immutable truth, carrying divine authority, the word of both father and Father. The writer repeats this most forcibly:

"Honour thy father and thy mother" is an absolute law, given without reference to the worthiness of the individual parent; it being a duty which the child owes to himself, to honour his parent simply *as parents*, without considering whether or not they have fulfilled their duty. There is a limit beyond which human nature cannot be expected to go: when actual moral turpitude renders "honour" a perfect farce; when respect becomes a mockery, and obedience an impossibility. But even then one resource remains - and remains forever - endurance and silence. ("Parents", 512, emphasis in original)

Since parenthood "came by the ordination of Providence",

it may be a great burden, even a great misfortune, but there it is: and nothing but death can end it. No short-comings on the parental side can abrogate one atom of the plain duty of the child - submission so long as submission is possible, reverence while one fragment of respect remains; and, after that, endurance. ("Parents", 515)

Endurance, submission, silence. These words resound at the heart of Molly's dilemma. In fact, "To Parents" highlights many of the problems faced by the younger generation in *Wives and Daughters*. Patsy Stoneman's analysis of the novel is based on the idea of evolutionary change, through the "anarchic processes of sexual selection".¹¹ The socially conservative institutions of lineage and marriage are challenged by the way in which the characters marry according to their own desires rather than social suitability. It would seem that in *Wives and Daughters* the children are indeed "of larger mould and wider capacities"

¹¹ Stoneman 189. Yeazell partially disputes Stoneman's argument, claiming "there is nothing 'anarchic' - if much that is Darwinian - in Molly's instinctive selection of Roger", *Fictions* 215. Both critics therefore accept an "evolutionary" reading of the novel, of generations in the process of progressive change.

("Parents", 514). Certainly the major area of conflict between generations in the novel concerns the choice of marriage partner. The two secrets Molly must keep, and ultimately resolve, involve a secret marriage and a secret engagement. Perhaps not surprisingly, in "To Parents" one area where the child can disobey its parent is in marrying. The writer overcomes the seemingly contradictory nature of this admission by emphasizing that marriage (and the corollaries of family and the domestic hearth, with the concomitant, but unstated, containment of sexuality) is important and that good parents who carried out their duty to their children would provide good marriage partners for them and not have their children look elsewhere: "The safest and only way to make children marry rightly is by setting before them such ensamples [*sic*] of true manhood and womanhood that they would shrink from choosing a wife or husband inferior to their father or mother" (517).

"Old Ways and New Ways": Molly and True Womanhood.

Where, therefore, does Molly look for her "ensamples of true ... womanhood"? Molly has two major models, both of whom stand as mothers to her¹². Mrs Hamley and Mrs Gibson epitomize the extremes of selfless- and selfish-ness. In fact each in her own way is a construction of "the angel in the house". Mrs Hamley is selfless and unworldly. "A delicate fine London lady" (73), she gave up her own interests for those of her husband and sons. Although she is seemingly lauded for being the perfect wife and mother, her selflessness is

¹² It could be claimed that Molly's most important "ensample" is her father, who as a doctor is nurturing and selfless, and who also teaches her the value of silence. But, as I will argue below, his case is not totally applicable for Molly because of the issue of gender. As a man he has freedom from certain constraints where as a woman she does not. The same argument applies for nurturing, caring Roger who preaches selflessness to Molly, but who is free to escape the claustrophobic surroundings which threaten to suffocate her.

dangerous.¹³ Through literalizing the metaphor of self-sacrifice, Gaskell shows the death threat implicit in such altruism, since "possibly Mrs Hamley would not have sunk into the condition of a chronic invalid if her husband had cared a little more for her various tastes, or allowed her the companionship of those who did" (73). However, the Squire "loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well" (74). Mrs Hamley is out of touch with reality, in sharp contrast with those characters who revel in life and the outdoors, Molly and Roger. She writes poems about an "unseen pond" which Molly visits and of which Roger knows the natural history. She lives a "lonely shut-up life", in her "moated grange"; travels in a "close carriage", and when there is a beautiful winter's day to admire, "the blinds were down, and out of Mrs Hamley's windows nothing of this was to be seen" (87, 116, 114, 226).

Although a loving mother, she has shown favouritism to Osborne which has important consequences. He has been allowed to lead a selfish life, as self-indulgent as his mother is self-sacrificing, and this has not prepared him to be the new squire should his father die; fastidious and exacting he shuns farming and dabbles in romantic verse. His likeness to his mother is stressed. He has her maiden name, he looks like her, and his femininity is emphasized - he is "fine, delicate almost to effeminacy in dress and manner" (288), and he is the only male character to become ill. Like his counterpart in the Gibson household, Cynthia, he is forced into becoming mysterious and secretive, as his life turns out differently from his parents' ambitions for him. Rather than submit and endure,

¹³ Some critics have been prepared to see Mrs Hamley only as "an angel" and "Mrs Gaskell's attractive portrayal of that domestic happiness that has been described in so many of our novels in different forms". See Basch 66, and Hazel Mews, *Frail Vessels, Woman's Role in Women's Novels from Fanny Burney to George Eliot* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1969) 144. Although Patsy Stoneman is critical of Mrs Hamley, she still would see her as "conform[ing] closely to the conduct-book model of the angel in the house" and being "a more sincere version of attaining power through the art of pleasing", 176.

he chooses to disobey his parents' wishes. His mother lives through him and when he lets her down, she dies. Roger, on the other hand, has as a boy been disparaged by his mother. He loves and admires her, but once laughed at, "thereafter he left off all demonstration of affection" (75). Roger is a survivor, and the irony of the novel is that the dull, clumsy boy becomes the hero, and, with Molly's aid, the saviour of the household in the end.

To do so, Roger takes not only his philosophy of life, but also his construction of ideal womanhood, from his "saintly" mother's behaviour. His advice to Molly when he discovers her crying bitterly over the news of her father's impending marriage, is to think of others before herself. But for Roger, as well as for the other altruistic masculine model in Molly's life, her doctor father, such advice has different consequences. Even when in love, Roger is able to escape the suffocation of the domestic sphere and travel into a wider domain where he conveniently can forget it: "he had been too actively busy for some time to have leisure to bestow much thought on Cynthia" (415). Mr Gibson, too, can escape through work; moved to tears at the thought of "how quiet and undemonstrative his little Molly had become in her general behaviour to him; but how once or twice, when they had met upon the stairs, or were otherwise unwitnessed, she had caught him and kissed him - hand or cheek - in a sad passionateness of affection" he is, nevertheless, "five minutes afterwards" engrossed in a medical case, and too busy "to have any thought for his own cares, which, if they really existed, were of so trifling a nature compared to the hard reality of this hopeless woe" (365).¹⁴

¹⁴ Patsy Stoneman argues that Mr Gibson offers a model of "a kind of altruism which is neither selfish nor sentimental", and is "the most attractive of a long line of fallible fathers [in Gaskell's works] ... from whom their daughters must fight free", 177. Stoneman discusses Carol Gilligan's three stages of altruism, pointing out that Roger, as a man, can move on to the stage "in which 'obligation extends to include the self as well as others'", 179. This reinforces my idea that Molly must learn to care for her self.

For Molly, on the other hand, confined to the domestic sphere, there is no escape from her own "hopeless woe" and she senses this very early as she tries to put Roger's advice into action: "Thinking more of others' happiness than of her own was very fine; but did it not mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the true desires, that made her herself? Yet in this deadness lay her only comfort; or so it seemed" (169). In a moment of despair she literalizes the metaphor of selfsacrifice: "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it, I might as well never have lived" (170). Mrs Hamley is, therefore, in Patsy Stoneman's words, "an unhealthy model for Molly".¹⁵ In a passage which recalls Gaskell's description of Ruth's mother, she is presented as the Ruskinian domestic ideal:

Quiet and passive as Mrs Hamley had always been in appearance, she was the ruling spirit of the house as long as she lived. The directions to the servants, down to the minutest particulars, came from her sitting-room, or from the sofa on which she lay. Her children always knew where to find her; and to find her, was to find love and sympathy. Her husband, who was often restless and angry from one cause or another, always came to her to be smoothed down and put right. He was conscious of her pleasant influence over him, and became at peace with himself when in her presence; just as a child is at ease with someone who is both firm and gentle. But the keystone of the family arch was gone, and the stones of which it was composed began to fall apart. (285)

From this we can see that, even to her husband, she is more mother than wife, and Molly, who was "an agreeable companion in her hours of loneliness" (88), must learn that Mrs Hamley's "lonely shut-up life" is a dangerous example and cannot be the answer to her own quest for selfhood.¹⁶

¹⁵ Stoneman 176.

¹⁶ The figure of the invalid in Gaskell's works can be contrasted with her counterpart in those of Charlotte Yonge. Where both construct the invalid as a spiritual centre of the household, for Gaskell invalidity is a danger, whereas for Yonge bodilessness/self-sacrifice is to be pursued. See Chapter 12.

Mrs Gibson, on the other hand, embodies the other extreme of womanhood, with all the appearances of femininity. Molly's father, though by no means a bad parent, makes a fundamental error in his choice of second wife. Where Mrs Hamley is socially isolated and increasingly bodiless, Mrs Gibson is gregarious, indeed a social climber, and a seeker of creature comforts, with a shifting sense of moral values. Mrs Gibson's desire to appear "feminine" is exemplified best in relation to illness and the "femininity of invalidism". In an attempt to appear ethereal and bodiless, she manipulates food and eating as a code of gentility, refusing to eat in public, but snacking on trays of food sent to her room. She is disappointed in Dr Nicholls who sees through her game when she

was trying to train her midday appetite into the genteelest of all ways, and thought (falsely enough) that Dr Nicholls was a good person to practise the semblance of ill health upon, and that he would give her the proper civil amount of commiseration for her ailments, which every guest ought to bestow upon a hostess who complains of her delicacy of health. (368)¹⁷

When she does in fact become ill, she is a difficult patient, being "one of those who, when their malady is only trifling, exaggerate it, but when it is really of some consequence, are unwilling to sacrifice any pleasures by acknowledging it" (586). Once recovered, however, she retains her invalid ways, aware of the source of power in this position: "Mrs Gibson breakfasted in bed: she had done so ever since she had had the influenza" (587).

¹⁷ In her chapter "Hunger, Sexuality and Etiquette" (12-29), Helena Michie elaborates on the way in which in Victorian fiction and etiquette books the heroine's/young lady's hunger is either silenced, denied or marginalized. According to Michie, hunger, through Eve's eating of the apple, signifies desire, and female hunger cannot be acted out in public, and is often confined to the privacy of the bedroom, which again connects it to sexuality. She sees daintiness and femininity expressed through ill-health and the denial of food, and argues that Mrs Gibson's show of feminine ill-health and delicacy points to her belief in her "superior class position", 26. Following Michie's argument I would add that Mrs Gibson's actions could be read, as well, as an attempt to appear youthful.

Mrs Gibson is selfish to the "depths of her worldly heart" (357). Yet nevertheless she is constructed in her way as an angel in the house. As Patsy Stoneman points out, "Mrs Gibson's 'imperfections' are not simply 'human' but specifically related to the ideology of the pleasing female".¹⁸ Through Mrs Gibson, Gaskell shows how the feminine ideal can be subverted as a means of getting exactly what one wants, that the conduct book wife is no asset to the family if she does not possess her own sense of moral integrity in the first place. Mrs Gibson would see herself as the model of selflessness; her role is to please those around her, and to do so she will say or do whatever pleases. In some ways, as a poor governess, these have been her survival techniques. The Cumnors, for instance,

found it agreeably useful to have any one in the house who was so well acquainted with their ways and habits; so ready to talk, when a little trickle of conversation was required; so willing to listen, and to listen with tolerable intelligence, if the subjects spoken about did not refer to serious solid literature, or science, or politics, or social economy. About novels and poetry, travels and gossip, personal details, or anecdotes of any kind, she always made exactly the remarks which are expected from an agreeable listener; and she had sense enough to confine herself to those short expressions of wonder, admiration, and astonishment, which may mean anything, when more recondite things were talked about. (130)

Mrs Gibson reflects the ability to be all to everyone, not so much selfless as "overserved"; hence the variety of her names in the novel: Miss Clare, Clare, Mrs Kirkpatrick, Hyacinth, Mrs Gibson. Gaskell exposes the reverse or negative side of the self-abnegation required of women by the ideology: not giving up oneself from an active desire to think of others but from a passive reflection of moods that can then mean little exertion is necessary. Cynthia, too, is like her mother in her chameleon nature; she has a charm which "as its essence seems to

¹⁸ Stoneman 173. Stoneman is making the point that most critics have seen Mrs Gibson only as Gaskell's masterpiece of satirizing human folly and hypocrisy.

consist in the most exquisite power of adaptation to varying people and still more various moods; 'being all things to all men'" (254). Cynthia is feminine, then, in the way the patriarchal ideology would like to construct women: "it was part of the charm of her soft allurements that she was so passive" (269). Her multiplicity of selves is expressed not so much in changes of names, but of potential changes, in the number of men from whom she receives proposals: Mr Preston, Mr Coxe, Roger, and Mr Henderson. Her brilliancy, though "a little tiresome when brought into everyday life", is expressed as "the glitter of the pieces of a broken mirror, which confuses and bewilders" (389).

As a wife and stepmother, Mrs Gibson revels in doing everything by the book and "her words were always like ready-made clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts" (349). Her strong view of herself is founded upon keeping up appearances; she wishes to appear a fine lady, the perfect wife and mother. Her early confidences to Molly and her father sound as though they are repeated from etiquette books, although always undercut by Gaskell's irony: "I long to be making you happy. I want to make your home a place of rest and comfort to you; and I do so wish to cherish your sweet Molly" (158). She expounds to Molly,

"We must make him so happy. I'm afraid he has had a great deal to annoy him at home; but we will do away with all that now ... you must tell me what your dear father dislikes most in these fanciful ways, and I shall take care to avoid it. You must be my little friend and helper in pleasing him. It will be such a pleasure to me to attend to his slightest fancies. About my dress, too - what colours does he like best? I want to do everything in my power with a view to his approval." [But when Molly takes her at her word and describes how her father likes a snack of cheese in the kitchen, she exclaims,] "Oh! but my dear, we must change all that. I shouldn't like to think of your father eating cheese; it's such a strong-smelling, coarse kind of thing. We must get him a cook who can toss him an omelette or something elegant." (162)

Far from making his home a haven of peace, she brings dissension and deceit, all in the effort to please.

If Mrs Hamley, in silencing her "self", has become less of a wife than a mother, Mrs Gibson, in her desire to be a wife, shows few motherly feelings, and forces Cynthia and then Molly into secrecy and silence. Marriage to her is "a release from the thralldom of keeping school: keeping an unprofitable school, with barely pupils enough to pay for house rent and taxes, food, washing, and the requisite masters" (156). A thorough construction of the middle-class ideology of womanhood, she acts on its beliefs. In her eyes it is "not natural" to spend her life "toiling and moiling for money". She believes "marriage is the natural thing" (131) and daydreams "how pleasant it would be to have a husband once more; - some one who would work while she sate at her elegant ease in a prettily furnished drawing-room" (138). In having Mrs Gibson voice such ideologically sound sentiments, Gaskell exposes how that ideology can lead to what she, Gaskell, would condemn as selfishness. Mrs Gibson, with her "polished" manners and "mirror-like mind" (168), is never portrayed as a bad woman, black as opposed to white, but more in those shades of grey through lavender which suit her so well. Even Mr Gibson, though impatient of her moral shortcomings, must admit to her conduct book virtues:

He had obtained an unexceptional chaperone, if not a tender mother, for his little girl; a skilful manager of his previously disorderly household; a woman who was graceful and pleasant to look at for the head of his table. ... The feminine companionship of the mother and daughter was agreeable to him as well as to his child - when Mrs Gibson was moderately sensible and not over-sentimental, he mentally added ... at any rate, she was harmless, and wonderfully just to Molly for a stepmother. (365)

Yet Mrs Gibson is not "harmless". Although a model of femininity, she has not provided Cynthia with what Gaskell would construct as an "ensample of

true womanhood" and much of Cynthia's character is blamed on her mother's inadequacies as a mother. Cynthia is, in fact, a more intelligent and more wily version of her mother, who sees her daughter, and to a lesser degree her stepdaughter Molly, as rivals. Cynthia has been at boarding school since she was four and makes much of this neglect in explaining her own want of high moral standards:

"We won't speak of mamma ... but you must see she isn't one to help a girl with much advice or good - Oh, Molly, you don't know how I was neglected just at a time when I wanted friends most. Mamma does not know it; it is not in her to know what I might have been if I had only fallen into wise, good hands." (486)

"Gathering Clouds": Endurance, silence, illness.

The two examples of wives and mothers to whom Molly can look are, therefore, seriously flawed, and the behaviour of both leads indirectly and directly to Molly's silence.¹⁹ From Mrs Hamley, she learns to silence her self in thinking of others. With Mrs Gibson she learns when not to speak; to confront, and come to a better understanding of, her "self". The tension between these two extremes, as well as the silencing of her desires, her sexuality, are all ingredients in causing her illness, for all involve a lack of voice. Thinking of others means keeping their secrets, and results in conflicting loyalties.²⁰ It is part of Molly's growth of self-awareness as she struggles to reconcile them all, and balance them with her sense of right and wrong, because secrecy brings not only silence and inner struggle, but ultimately a sense of duplicity and deceitfulness. Openness is part of Molly's nature. As her knowledge of others' secrets grow, and as she

¹⁹ I am aware that there are other substitute mothers for Molly in the novel, such as the Misses Browning, Miss Eyre or even Lady Harriet, but as single women, these women are marginalized. If Molly is destined to become a new kind of wife and mother, then it is on the models of wife- and motherhood that I must concentrate. Aimeé Hamley, too, is an example of strong motherhood, but Molly sees her only as a widow, rather than wife.

²⁰ See Homans for a discussion of the conflict as two kinds of selflessness, 256-257.

becomes more burdened with keeping quiet about Mrs Gibson's behaviour, she is seen almost suffocating. When Mrs Gibson rudely dismisses Roger and asks him not to visit, Molly

afraid of betraying emotion, and "making a scene", as Mrs Gibson called any signs of warm emotion, ... laid down her book hastily, and ran upstairs to her room, and locked the door in order to breathe freely. (361)

For the price of submission and duty for Molly is silence or a sense of guilt when she cannot remain silent. The examples accumulate throughout the novel as Molly struggles with this loss of a voice to articulate herself: "Molly did not speak, but it was by a strong effort that she kept silence"; "Molly bit her lips to prevent herself from saying anything disagreeable"; "she kept silence, though her lips quivered from time to time" (167, 209, 666). The most prolonged debate on silence is seen in Molly's thoughts about what she sees as her conflicting responsibilities to her stepmother and her father:

At first she made herself uncomfortable with questioning herself as to how far it was right to leave unnoticed the small domestic failings - the webs, the distortions of truth which had prevailed in their household ever since her father's second marriage. She knew that very often she longed to protest, but did not do it, from the desire of sparing her father any discord; and she saw by his face that he, too, was occasionally aware of certain things that gave him pain, as showing that his wife's standard of conduct was not as high as he would have liked. It was a wonder to Molly whether this silence was right or wrong. With a girl's want of toleration, and want of experience to teach her the force of circumstances, and of temptation, she had often been on the point of telling her stepmother some forcible home truths. But, possibly, her father's example of silence, and often some piece of goodness on Mrs Gibson's part (for after her way, and when in a good temper, she was very kind to Molly), made her hold her tongue. (407)

The implication of this passage is that the sad lesson of maturity is to learn to be silent.²¹ But for Molly it seems to be more. Beyond the feeling of suffocation, of her self being stifled, that she endures, silence is linked with a feeling of oppression, weariness, confusion, unhappiness, and ultimately illness. To think only of others is to kill oneself off and this precept underlies her reaction to Roger's proposal to Cynthia, and his leaving without saying goodbye (for Molly's greatest secret, her love for Roger, she struggles to keep even from herself):

She felt as if she could not understand it at all; but as for that matter, what did she understand? Nothing. For a few minutes her brain seemed in too great a whirl to comprehend anything but that she was being carried on in earth's diurnal course, with rocks, and stones, and trees, with as little volition on her part as if she were dead. Then the room grew stifling, and instinctively she went to the open casement window, and leant out, gasping for breath. (418)

Molly finds herself increasingly divided as she puts Roger's advice into practice. Where does her first loyalty lie: in obedience to her father or in her own sense of right behaviour? She submits to her stepmother and is forced to show affection to her father in private. She keeps Osborne's secret, but is aware of the strain it has placed on the Hamley family. She becomes embroiled in Cynthia's mysteries, only to suffer pain for the absent Roger, and lose her own good name. As with Margaret Hale, the cost for Molly is overwhelming, for it has already been established how important behaving correctly is to her. The loss of "name" can be put alongside the loss of "voice" in its effect upon her. When her father charges her with the gossip circulating about her, she does not deny it, but faces his anger. He relents when he sees "her face was very white, but it bore the

²¹ See Spacks 38: "The language and structure of *Wives and Daughters* consistently emphasize Molly's ineffectuality and its psychic costs, registered not in active rebellion but in a magnifying sense of dullness".

impress of the final sincerity of death, when the true expression prevails without the poor disguises of time" (568).

Molly's subsequent illness, therefore, cannot be dismissed easily as "one of those low-spirited declines into which Victorian heroines drop at low moments of the plot".²² What has happened is that Molly, in thinking only of others, in compromising her own sense of correct behaviour, in submitting to more and more adult responsibilities, has for too long denied her self. Her illness externalises the fact that she is beginning to vanish, as it made "a long pull upon her strength, which seemed to lessen day by day, until at last her father feared that she might become a permanent invalid" (638).²³ Molly is in danger of being invalidated, becoming null and void, like Mrs Hamley, to whom she was "as a daughter". Before she can become the second Mrs Roger Hamley, Molly must find the balance between this selflessness, and the total selfishness of her other "mother", Mrs Gibson.

The ideas of silence, submission, and selflessness converge in the proposed visit to the Towers, about which Mrs Gibson, unaware of the devastating irony of her words, says to Molly, "If we wise elders decide that you are to go, you must submit in silence" (666). Molly obeys but resents "hearing plans discussed about her as if she was an inanimate chattel!" (667). Molly has become an object, no longer a person but a thing, and paradoxically, it is this which brings her recovery. At the Towers, Molly "was only too glad to allow Lady Harriet decide

²² Lerner 8. Even Patricia Meyer Spacks explores Molly's illness no further than commenting "under the increasingly intolerable discipline of refraining she falls into a Victorian decline", 38. For Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Molly's illness is confined to the end of the novel, where it replaces her "social ostracism" after her name is linked with Preston's, a ploy used by Gaskell as "a form of suffering that at once completes her rehabilitation in the eyes of the community", *Fictions* 213.

²³ Helena Michie comments that Molly is like other Victorian heroines who "threaten their lovers, families and readers with their own disappearance from the texts they so cautiously inhabit, [they] will grow smaller, frailer, and more transparent in search of a happy ending", 25.

everything for her", and she is taken over, put on the sofa, dressed, and "fetched down by Lady Harriet" who advises Charles "to look after her ... and place her where she can hear and see everything, without any fuss and responsibility" (669, 670). Only through the attendance of others to her cares, and by submitting totally, paradoxically both selfless and selfish, does Molly begin to live again. "For the first time in many weeks Molly began to feel the delightful spring of returning health" (671). Although this is not the end of Molly's inner struggles, she has learned an important lesson. She tells Mrs Goodenough, "when I want to be married, I'll not trouble mamma. I'll look out for myself" (681).

"Reviving Hopes and Brightening Prospects": Sexuality and the new wife.

Although Molly has learned a lesson about her own independence of thought, she cannot necessarily carry it through into independence of action. Although she might speak so in domestic circles, nevertheless the dictates of social propriety make sure she must still keep a feminine silence in the wider realm. After all, it is "looking out for herself" that landed Cynthia in trouble. Although Molly was the one who almost "lost" her name in the attachment between Cynthia and Mr Preston, the coded language in the text indicates the possible outcome of Cynthia's behaviour. Cynthia's transactions with Preston have not only been conducted illicitly, out of doors, but they have involved the exchange of money. Preston has used his loan to her to extract a promise of marriage; that is, he expects her body in return for money. Cynthia, though aware of the power of her sexual attractiveness over men, appears as naïvely unaware as Molly of the implications of her actions with Preston, for she believes that by repaying the debt, she will have fulfilled her part of the bargain, which she has come to see as a purely commercial transaction. In *Wives and Daughters* the hints of prostitution are far from being an overt centre of discourse as they are in *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, or *North and South*. Nevertheless,

the potential is there. Molly worries over her involvement in Cynthia's "underhand work", for "she began to be afraid that she herself might be led into the practice. But she would try and walk in a straight path; and if she did wander out of it, it should only be to save pain to those whom she loved" (525). The silenced opposite here is the broad and predictable path of the harlot's progress and the image is repeated when Molly goes to face Preston alone, standing in for Cynthia. She was

oppressed with shame and complicity in conduct which appeared to her deceitful, yet willing to bear all and brave all, if she could once set Cynthia in a straight path - in a clear space, and almost more pitiful to her friend's great distress and possible disgrace, than able to give her that love which involves perfect sympathy. (528)

Molly's selflessness and her "courageous innocence" win in her confrontation with Preston, but so does her growing ability to know when to stay silent. "She perceived the impertinence of the tone; and her temper was none of the coolest. But she mastered herself and gained courage by so doing" (529). For some the scene would confirm that "Molly appears to have no sexual potential".²⁴ But in fact Molly's sexuality here is curiously complicated. On the one hand the apparent unconsciousness of the sexual implications of her behaviour on which interpretations like Spacks' rest is undercut by her own unease at her role in this duplicity, that she might be wandering out of the "straight path" - how far Molly is aware of this as a euphemism for improper sexual behaviour we are not to know. On the other hand, our awareness of her unconsciousness is in fact only from Preston's interpretation of her behaviour:

²⁴ Spacks 40. She would argue that Molly's asexuality provides power. For Stoneman, "Molly usurps the part of the younger son, who passes tests, fights duels, rescues damsels" 186. Yeazell would also dispute Spacks' claim that Molly has no sexual potential, *Fictions* 290, n. 9. Yeazell discusses Molly's meeting with Preston, *Fictions* 205-6. See as well Homans 266-268. Homans is the only one to look at the importance of money in the exchange between Cynthia and Preston, but because her argument is about the "currency" of language, and the circulation of words and meaning, she does not link this with sexuality.

besides, there was something that struck him most of all perhaps, and which shows the kind of man he was - he perceived Molly was as unconscious that he was a young man, and she a young woman, as if she had been a pure angel of heaven. (533)

The "kind of man" Preston interprets women's behaviour, both Cynthia's and Molly's, in sexual terms. It is Preston, rather than Gaskell, calling Molly an angel here.²⁵ Not only is he desexualizing and thus deadening her, but he is constructing her in the language of conduct books. Margaret Hale, too, was unaware of the public construction of such fearless behaviour, and as in Margaret's defence of Thornton, Molly also has her behaviour reinterpreted by the public male gaze: Mr Sheepshanks comes riding along, and immediately that there is a witness to her public presence, her behaviour is sexualized, and her "character" is on the line. She believes she is only living up to Roger's precepts of behaviour, but is apparently unaware that behaviour is gendered, and that what might be appropriate for a man is not necessarily so for a woman.

At the end of the novel, therefore, what is left to be reconciled is her awareness of her sexuality, her feelings for Roger, with the public propriety of admitting these feelings. Her confrontation with Preston had tried her "beyond her strength" (535) and "all the rest of that day Molly was depressed and not well. Having anything to conceal was so unusual - almost so unprecedented a circumstance with her that it preyed upon her in every way" (536). But once she is over her illness, the secrets dealing with Cynthia's and Osborne's illicit sexuality unravelled, Molly must face up finally to her own secret desires, a state which is constructed as part of her return to health.

²⁵ Yeazell, in line with her argument about licit and illicit consciousness, and the textual displacements and delays involved in Molly's awareness of her love for Roger, reads this passage as the narrator insisting "most strenuously on Molly's perfect innocence just as her habit of carrying others' secrets reaches this compromising climax", *Fictions* 206.

Molly's crisis of self-awareness about her feelings for Roger is not a crisis of revulsion as for Margaret and Jemima with their gibbering ghosts and deep sea monstrosities. This is because her silence has been more than what Ruth Bernard Yeazell calls "modest unconsciousness", or what Patsy Stoneman describes as sexual repression.²⁶ I would agree with Stoneman that

Molly's "innocence" is not the dangerous ignorance of Ruth, unable to distinguish Bellingham's "attentions" from love, and her ability to affirm friendship from a man saves her from the crippling shame of Margaret Hale and Cousin Phillis.²⁷

Molly's illness involved more than her unacknowledged feelings for Roger, and was part of a repression of self. Her silence was tied up as well with her filial role - obedience, endurance, and submission. The time of her increasing sexual awareness is therefore associated with health and an ability to speak for herself. But she is still confined by the restrictions of propriety and impropriety. Made aware by Mrs Goodenough and then the Squire of the public reading of her friendship with Roger, Molly, like Margaret Hale before her, is puzzled about how to behave:

Good Roger! Kind Roger! Dear Roger! It would be very hard to avoid him as much as was consistent with common politeness; but it would be right to do it; and when she was with him she must be as natural as possible, or he might observe some difference; but what was natural? How much ought she avoid being with him? Would he notice if she was more chary of her company, more calculating of her words? (683)

What was natural? Gaskell shows that for a woman the answer was paradoxically difficult. If Molly followed the ideological constraints of

²⁶ Yeazell, *Fictions* 213; Stoneman 193.

²⁷ Stoneman 197.

correctness - "she made laws for herself" (683) - she was behaving according to the dictates of femininity, a "natural woman", and therefore silenced: she must "calculate" her words. The implications of this are that Gaskell recognizes that women have more to say, but to voice their desires is to be deemed "unnatural". Molly ends up appearing "unnatural" by acting "naturally" according to the dictates of the feminine ideal, by behaving with propriety: "she was so different from her usual self that Roger noticed the change in her as soon as she arrived" (683). The constraints on her relationship with Roger are all expressed in terms of silence and voice. Roger "longed to have the old friendly right of asking her what it was" but did not "feel at liberty to speak to her in the old straightforward brotherly way" (690); Molly finds "his voice was so kind and true - his manner so winning yet wistful, that [she] would have been thankful to tell him all ... if only he himself had not lain at the very core and centre of all her perplexity and dismay" (691), and she worries that she has caused him pain by refusing "to converse freely with him" (697). The situation is eased only when "her old sweet, frank manner had returned" (692). Molly, otherwise, is silenced (689), or feels "as if she were choked" (695).

The ending of the novel, incomplete as it is, offers no solution to Molly. She has not been able to voice her desires to Roger. And it appears that she may never be able to do so directly, given the social codes of propriety; that the nature of their relationship is best when sexuality does not enter into it, when "their old friendliness" is not "troubled by the thought of a nearer relationship" (691). Yet, conservative as the ending seems, not everyone reads it as Spacks' "sad parable". Although it reinforces marriage as the only possible role for Molly, her life course from daughter to wife, "times", as Mrs Goodenough announces, "are changed" (682). For Patsy Stoneman, Molly's story can be seen "as a Darwinian transformation rather than a unique metamorphosis; an example of an evolutionary process which, with sexual selection as its rather alarming

dynamic, and human care and attention as its control, lessens, without dramatic upheaval, the distance between classes and genders".²⁸ For Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "compared to a work like *Villette*, this novel appears scarcely to question the familiar order of things. But the natural in *Wives and Daughters* is a process of change, not Rousseau's mystified absolute; and the hero who can see twenty things where his father sees only one is a hero with an eye for difference".²⁹

The process of change is perhaps best seen if Molly's future is compared with that of Cynthia. Both are destined for the same future, marriage, but there is a difference in the nature of that future, and for all that Gaskell does not predict outside of the traditional conventional role, she ends on a note of optimism for the state of wives and daughters. It is important here that both Cynthia and Molly are at one time attached to the same man, for in the difference between them and the nature of that attachment, lies the optimism of the novel. Cynthia, like her mother, is a survivor. She has had to be, and she too has learned to suit the mood and atmosphere around her, a reflection of men's desires. On one level she is practical and hardheaded, not a romantic like Molly. She is more mature than Molly and has seen more of the world. She is one of the few women in the novel who has travelled further afield than London. She can see through social charades, but must conform to the image of the Victorian young girl, innocent and naive. But on the other hand, she epitomizes, as in a way her mother does, the Victorian ideal for the education of young women - to be a helpmeet, to "know what men want" and strive to please them. Once again Gaskell subverts the ideological construct. Cynthia's problem is that, unlike her mother, she is not self-deluded in this, and is aware that her upbringing has not given her a good moral grounding, that she wants to be liked and that is what

²⁸ Stoneman 199.

²⁹ Yeazell 216.

rules her actions. She has need of a protector, and yet this could be construed as "natural" according to the ideology. When we compare what happens over the potential loss of reputation for the two girls, we realise how isolated Cynthia is. Molly has friends who will speak for her and a father to turn to. Cynthia is on her own. Her only alternative to marriage is to follow her mother's path and teach, and although she toys with the independence that would give her, ultimately she does not want independence, she wants to be loved. Her independent acts only lead her into trouble. We note also the double standard operating - her engagement to Mr Preston she sees as "what people call 'youthful folly'" (528), but of course for girls, this was not allowed. It is her prettiness and her art of pleasing that attract Roger, and she is aware that these are not the kind of attributes he will need in a wife. Roger is constructed as a new kind of man, she as a "traditional" woman.

Molly on the other hand, for all her conventionality, is destined to be one of a new kind of wives. In her own way she is as outspoken and self-assertive as Cynthia, but always for a sound motive. She, too, has been brought up to please, but she learns that she must have some sense of her own worth, her own individuality in the process. And in learning to please she learns for herself. Thus she strives for and acquires a degree of education, far inferior to Roger's but far superior to that which her father really intended for her. The new kind of wife must be more of an equal. Cynthia uses books to hide behind to think her own thoughts. Molly reads to gain knowledge that she might talk more intelligently on subjects of interest to Roger. Their reactions to Roger's letters are telling. Cynthia tells Molly,

"Here's a place you may read, from that line to that," indicating two places. "I haven't read it myself, for it looked dullish - all about Aristotle and Pliny - and I want to get this bonnet-cap made up before we go out to pay our calls." ... [Molly] saw references made to books, which, with a little trouble, would be accessible to her here in

Hollingford. Perhaps the details and the references would make the letter dull and dry to some people, but not to her, thanks to his former teaching and the interest he had excited in her for his pursuits. (460)

Molly impresses Lord Hollingford with her knowledge of scientific matters, and so it is ironic that when Roger finally comes to notice her at the Towers it is when he realises her attractiveness as a woman: "Now in her pretty evening dress, with her hair beautifully dressed, her delicate complexion flushed a little with timidity, yet her movements and manners speaking quiet ease, Roger hardly recognised her, though he acknowledged her identity. He began to feel that admiring deference which most young men experience when conversing with a very pretty girl" (672). The clearsighted Lady Harriet can foresee the future. When Lord Hollingford points out Molly's unsuitability as a wife because "Roger Hamley is a man who will soon have a European reputation", she replies, "That's very possible, and yet it does not make any difference in my opinion. Molly Gibson is capable of appreciating him" (676).

Thus Molly is a new model. She is not just a mirror of male desires like Cynthia. She will not be just a mother like Mrs Hamley, nor a selfish wife like Mrs Gibson. The new wife allows for a female sexuality which is not simply predicated on maternal desire, as the dominant patriarchal ideology might construct, although Molly's role as a new wife might imply a new approach to motherhood as well. In "Of Queens' Gardens", contemporaneous to *Wives and Daughters*, Ruskin outlined the ideal education of the truly feminine girl. Far more wide reaching than mere superficial accomplishments, this education would fit her for her role as the spiritual guide of the domestic sphere:

a girl's education [with the exception of theology], should be nearly, in its course and material of study, the same as a boy's; but quite differently directed. A woman, in any rank of life, ought to know whatever her husband is likely to know, but to know it in a

different way. His command of it should be foundational and progressive; hers, general and accomplished for daily and helpful use ... speaking broadly, a man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly - while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends.³⁰

It would seem that Gaskell endorses Ruskin's view of the new model wife. Molly is not equal in education to Roger, but she is willing to learn. However for Gaskell there must be more in their marriage than mentor and pupil. Molly's education has been not merely towards wife and motherhood, but also for herself. Her education has not been only from books but from experience. She must balance the role of wife and mother with being herself, not diminish one role at the expense of another; be able to converse, if not on equal terms, at least in intelligible terms with her husband, and conversely, acknowledge desires not constructed solely in terms of motherhood, that silence at the centre of the title of the novel.

Wives and Daughters is about the world of women, "an everyday story", a novel where nothing ever really happens. The men come and go - even Osborne, the most feminine of them can escape, go to university and travel - they retire into their jobs, their books, their own pursuits. The women organise life within the boundaries set for them. Molly exemplifies the dilemmas faced by young middle-class girls as they struggle their way to womanhood bound by the constraints of an ideology which imposes filial obedience, silence and endurance. Gaskell questions, challenges, but never overturns, the word of the father. Without breaking away from the traditional roles set for women, she offers a redefinition of those roles - the new generation of wives and daughters may well be an improvement on the last.

³⁰ Ruskin 95-96.

Part III:

**Sensation and Numbness:
Illness and the Popular Body**

Chapter 10

"Preaching to the Nerves": Phobic enchantment and the Textual Body

A writer who boldly takes in hand the common mechanism of life, and by means of persons who might all be living in society for anything we can tell to the contrary, thrills us into wonder, terror, and breathless interest, with positive personal shocks of surprise and excitement ...

Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels", 1862.¹

It is quite true that there is a vulgar species of sensationalism, than which nothing can be worse. The halfpenny tales of murder and felony, of which a deluge is usually being poured forth, are really demoralising; for the difference between an artist who can look into the psychology of crime and terror, and the botcher who can do nothing more than lay on the carmine with a liberal brush, is so great as to be essential.

"The Sensational Williams", 1864.²

Try with me and mix

What will make a Novel,

All folks to transfix

In house or hall or hovel.

"How to Make a Novel - A Sensational Song", 1864.³

In any discussion of the phenomenon of the 1860s known as the sensation novel, critical commentators have turned to its contemporary reception and the "sensational" treatment it received from reviewers of the time.⁴ They have

¹ [Margaret Oliphant], "Sensation Novels", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* XCI (May 1862): 566.

² "The Sensational Williams", *All the Year Round* 11 (February 1864):14.

³ "How to Make a Novel - A Sensational Song", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* XCV (May 1864): 636.

⁴ For the most comprehensive coverage see Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1980); on critical reception, Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder eds., *The Woman Question: Literary Issues, 1837-1883, The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, Vol. III (New York and London: Garland, 1983); more specialized studies include Richard D. Altick, *Evil Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations* (London: John Murray, 1987); Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989); Patrick Brantlinger, "What is 'Sensational' about the 'Sensation Novel'?", *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 1-28; Martin A. Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection and Narrative* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992); Jonathan Loesberg, "The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction", *Representations* 13 (1986): 115-138; D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988),

pointed out how this reception ranged from benign amusement to virulent hostility. Winifred Hughes comments that "although the sensation novel has since been consigned to oblivion, from the viewpoint of contemporaries, its lurid manifestation presided over a 'literary reign of terror,' which transformed the moral and cultural landscape of a decade".⁵ Initially the reviews might appear unconnected to the subject of illness and the construction of femininity, but by investigating the metaphors used in such texts, it can be seen that the texts engage in a number of discourses, relating to the status, the disciplining, the pathologizing, and the feminizing of the textual body.

The image of disease, as applied to the sensation novel, hardly goes unnoticed. Winifred Hughes links the antipathy to the sensation novel to prudery, moral objection and social antagonisms, and comments "most contemporaries interpret the sensation vogue as a morbid or unhealthy symptom, whether or not they identify it as a side-effect of the more wholesome official outlook of the Victorian period".⁶ For her, the novels uncovered aspects of social corruption, and were unwelcome because the subject was both distasteful and disturbing. But it is noticeable that she too resorts to images of (feminine) illness when trying to explain such reactions:

It becomes easier to understand and sympathize with the *excesses* and *hysteria* of mid-century sensationalism when they are seen in

especially chapter 5, "Cage aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*"; Virginia B. Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington, Kentucky: UP of Kentucky, 1990); Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine*; Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1991); Showalter, *Literature*, especially the chapter "Subverting the Feminine Novel - Sensationalism and Feminine Protest"; Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-century Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Anthea Trodd, *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989).

⁵ Hughes 37.

⁶ Hughes 35.

the actual context of smothering respectability and fastidiousness. The extremes of the sensation novel are in one respect a sign of desperation and dissent.⁷

The sensation novel, for Hughes, was disturbing because it was "in touch with the deepest anxieties of its age", and it was its subversive qualities, undermining traditional values, that "provoked such *visceral* outrage".⁸ But although Hughes notes the images of disease and corruption, she too appears trapped in the same discursive formation. Later critics, such as D. A. Miller, Jenny Bourne Taylor, and Martin A. Kayman have investigated the implications of such images further, with discussion of the "pathology" of the text. Rather than merely "interpreted" as a symptom, as Hughes would have it, for Taylor the metaphor of illness is displaced on to the text itself. She argues that

the sensation novel was seen as a collective nervous disorder, a morbid addiction on the body of the reader and as an infection from outside, continually threatening to pollute and undermine its boundaries through this process of metaphoric transference and analogy especially centred on the "feminine" body.⁹

According to Miller, what is sensational about the sensation novel, but overlooked by commentators who concentrate on its content and genre, are the very sensations that it produces on and in the body of the reader. The silence in sensation criticism is sensation itself. He writes:

the celebration of sensation (as a physical experience to be enjoyed for its own sake) merely *receives* it; the censure of sensation (granting to it the obviousness of something about which there is nothing to say) refuses to *read* it. In either case, sensation is felt to occupy a natural site entirely outside meaning, as though in the breathless body signification expired.¹⁰

⁷ Hughes 36, emphasis added.

⁸ Hughes 65, emphasis added.

⁹ Taylor 4.

¹⁰ Miller 147, emphasis in original. See also Kayman 177.

For Miller, reading the sensation novel therefore is associated with the nervous effects it produces both in the characters within the text and in the body of the reader. However, reading becomes "complicated - not to say troubled - by its [the association of nervousness] coincident, no less insistent or regular association with femininity".¹¹ In the sensation novel we find, once again, the hystericized text.

As hysteria is an illness of transgression, so the sensation novel can be seen as a literature of transgression.¹² It has been impossible to classify it in some generically "pure" form. The sensation "genre" could be described as a product of contemporary critics, for those who produced the first novels were by no means working in conjunction. The reviewers, however, united these disparate works under the derogatory term "sensation".¹³ Historically sensation novels could be seen as a mid-century transition from Gothic to detective mystery. For Hughes, sensation novels evince "the violent yoking of romance and realism", a form which "deliberately strains both modes to the limit, disrupting the accepted balance between them". She writes of the oppositions and apparent contradictions of the sensation mode: "The subject matter of the sensationalists is at once outrageous and carefully documented"; the narrative technique "combines a melodramatic tendency to abstraction with the precise detail of detective fiction, an unlimited use of suspense and coincidence with an almost scientific concern for accuracy and authenticity", with the aim of producing "a kind of civilized melodrama", an "everyday gothic" and "a middle-class

¹¹ Miller 151.

¹² This point is also made by Lyn Pykett, in reference to the literary market, novel production, and the "democratisation, massification and feminisation" defining high and low culture. Pykett's argument resembles mine quite closely at points although her work came to my notice after this chapter was written.

¹³ See Loesberg 115.

Newgate". For Hughes "the chosen territory of the sensation novelists lies somewhere between the possible and the improbable, ideally at their point of intersection".¹⁴ The very amorphousness of the form produced unease. As Taylor claims,

the panic generated by the sensation novel as much as the mode itself provided a focus for the range of distinct, though interrelated, tensions about wider and longer-term transformations that were taking place in middle-class publishing and literary culture.¹⁵

But more than that, the sensation novel served as the site of intersection of a number of diverse discourses; not only concerning the status of the "literary" as opposed to the "popular" novel, the methods of literary production and circulation, or whether the purpose of the novel was to teach or entertain, but also about class relations, women's subjectivity, the nature of the public and the private spheres.¹⁶ In each case, the debate was argued in terms always already implicit in the construction of class and gender, oppositions of purity and contagion, health and disease, centred on the pathologized feminine body.

In the reviews of the sensation novels as they appeared in the 1860s the images which appear again and again are those of illness, corruption and disease contrasted with wholesomeness and health, appetite, consumption and taste, animality, the market place, and the nervous system, all of which have the underlying link of the body. For Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, working especially with the ideas of Bakhtin on carnival and Mary Douglas on purity and taboo, these images evoke the grotesque body, the transgressive, and the "low", "the primary site of contradiction, the site of conflicting desires and mutually

¹⁴ Hughes 16.

¹⁵ Taylor 5.

¹⁶ Reviewers of the period were also engaged in a debate about "novels with a purpose"; see for example, the article of that name, [Justin MacCarthy], *Westminster Review* 82 (1864): 24-49.

incompatible representation". For them the "low" is both reviled and desired, and "repugnance and fascination are the twin poles of the process in which a *political* imperative to reject and eliminate the debasing 'low' conflicts powerfully and unpredictably with a desire for this Other".¹⁷ They have shown how authors such as Jonson and Dryden attempted to produce literary respectability by distancing themselves from the "low" whilst at the same time being fascinated by it and appropriating some of its symbolic processes. They write:

Sites and domains of discourse, like the theatre or the author's study or the marketplace, are *themselves* hierarchized and ranked, emerging out of an historical complex of competing domains and languages each carrying different values and kinds of power.¹⁸

Similarly the sensation novel, with its connections to theatre and melodrama, and its best-selling popularity, challenged, fascinated and repelled the emerging literary establishment. However, rather than claiming, as Winifred Hughes does, that "the rise of the sensation genre coincided with the height of the novelist's newly won prestige, his new presence as a social and ethical force" and that "it is no wonder that the sensation vogue appeared all the more formidable at a time when prose fiction could no longer be disregarded, when it had finally established its right to be taken seriously", I would argue that the threat posed by the sensation novel, judging by the reaction to it, highlights the way in which the "serious" novelists and their critics were still establishing their domain.¹⁹ The critical reviews were in themselves a relatively new public site of discourse and a powerful forum to regulate literary production, what might or might not be said, the nature of communication, and the importance to be placed on it. As Stallybrass and White argue:

¹⁷ Stallybrass and White 4, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Stallybrass and White 61, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Hughes 9.

An utterance is legitimated or disregarded according to its place of production and so, in large part, the history of political struggle has been the history of the attempts made to control significant sites of assembly and spaces of discourse.²⁰

By denigrating the sensation novel, therefore, "serious" literature could define itself as the superior, more acceptable and purer form of fiction, and the literary critic could claim to be the true arbiter of public taste. The discursive space so formed, however, was already occupied by assumptions of class and gender. If "serious" literature was pure, wholesome, middle-class and masculine, the sensation novel, distanced as other, had to be diseased, unhealthy, lower class and feminine.

Critical displeasure and the pathologized Text

The review most representative of this intersection of discourses was that which appeared anonymously in the *Quarterly Review*, in April 1863, in which were discussed Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, Wilkie Collins' *No Name*, as well as twenty-one other nowadays unremembered works, including *Passages in the Life of a Fast Young Lady* by Mrs Grey, *Only a Woman*, by Captain Lascelles Wraxall, and the anonymous *Clinton Maynyard, a Tale of the World, the Flesh, and the Devil*.²¹ The article was entitled "Sensation Novels", as was Margaret Oliphant's review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* the previous year.²² The word "sensation" had obvious currency, and had

²⁰ Stallybrass and White 80.

²¹ Written by H. L. Mansell, "Sensation Novels", *Quarterly Review* CXIII (April 1863): 481-514. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text. Of the 24 novels, seven included women's names in the titles, five were overtly by women, eight being anonymous.

²² Oliphant, "Sensation Novels" 564-584. Oliphant had already made use of the term, however, in 1855, when she described Wilkie Collins' novel, *Antonina*: "The 'sensation' which it is the design of Mr. Wilkie Collins to raise in our monotonous bosom, is - horror". [Margaret

transferred from its original application to dramatic productions, such as Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*, which began in London in 1860, to the novel form.²³ But although sensation in the theatre was disparaged, sensation in the novel was even more dangerous. It had moved from the public to the private arena, and had invaded the sanctuary of the middle-class home. Reading was a private act and the pleasure to be gained from the sensation novel was therefore suspect. As Margaret Oliphant wrote of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, "the reader's nerves are affected like the hero's. He feels the thrill of the untoward resemblance, an ominous painful mystery. He, too, is chilled by a confused and unexplainable alarm".²⁴

The appeal of such novels to the nervous system was attacked as well by Mansell, to whom the sensation novel was "a class of literature" similar to "a certain class of popular sermons", which had "grown up around us". Mansell's review begins, therefore, by establishing the sensation novel with a metaphor of class and in a hierarchy of genre, where it is associated with the "low", the popular, and indiscriminate proliferation. Like the popular sermon which preaches "to the nerves instead of judgement", so Mansell sees sensation literature as "preaching to the nerves", and it is dangerous since it has "usurp[ed] in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher's office, playing no considerable part in moulding the minds and forming the

Oliphant], "Modern Novelists - Great and Small", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* LXXVII (May 1855): 566.

²³ The term, in fact, was doubly "other", since not only had it applied to "sensation scenes" on the stage, but these were perceived to have been imported from America, where Boucicault's play first appeared. *Punch* in 1861 published a poem, "Sense v. Sensation", in which the craze for novelty and the introduction of the word "sensation" was blamed upon the United States. *Punch* XLI (20 July, 1861): 31. For the history of the term sensation, see, for example, Altick 136-143; Kayman 173.

²⁴ Oliphant, "Sensation Novels" 565. See Miller for a fuller discussion of this article, and the implications of "feminine" nervous sensations for the (male) reader.

habits and tastes of its generation". Sensation literature, therefore, is influential; it is habit forming; it is almost a form of religion. Writers of such literature appeal to the nerves and "seem to acknowledge no other element in human nature to which they can appeal". Instead, "excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which they aim" (482). Having invoked the body, however, and the pleasurable effects that sensation literature might induce upon it, Mansell at this point extends his argument to include the idea of illness, and also adds a moral dimension to his discussion. Such works are not just dangerous but bad, a symptom of a wider social disorder, for, "as excitement, even when harmless in kind", Mansell claims,

cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree, works of this class manifest themselves as belonging, some more, some less, but all to some extent, to the morbid phenomena of literature - indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (482-3)

Mansell was not alone in this construction of sensation literature as a form of contagion. An anonymous article in the *Westminster Review* in 1866 claimed that

just as in the Middle Ages people were afflicted with the Dancing Mania and Lycanthropy, sometimes barking like dogs, and sometimes mewing like cats, so now we have a Sensation Mania. Just, too, as those diseases always occurred in seasons of dearth and poverty, and attacked only the poor, so does the Sensation Mania in Literature burst out only in times of mental poverty, and afflict only the most poverty-stricken minds. From an epidemic, however, it has lately changed into an endemic. Its virus is spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume.²⁵

²⁵ [John R. de C. Wise], "Belles Lettres", *Westminster Review* 86 (1866): 269. For a discussion of this subject from a different angle, the mixing of moral and medical language in relation to

And Margaret Oliphant, in 1867, argued that the reason why the novel makes good family reading with little censorship in Britain, unlike in France, is that English novels have a

very high reputation ... for a certain sanity, wholesomeness, and cleanness unknown to other literature of the same class. ... It has increased that liberty of reading which is the rule in most cultivated English houses; ... it has made us secure and unsuspicious in our reception of everything, or almost everything, that comes to us in the form of print. This noble confidence has been good for everybody concerned. It has put writers on their honour, and saved readers from that wounding consciousness of restraint or of danger which destroys any delicate appreciation. ... The novel, which is the favourite reading of the young - which is one of the chief amusements of all secluded and most suffering people - which is precious to women and unoccupied persons - has been kept by this understanding, or by a natural impulse better than any understanding, to a great degree pure from all noxious topics.²⁶

What each of these passages has in common is the intent to establish a domain of purity, a "natural" and enclosed space, epitomized by the middle-class home, the sanctified and sanitized domestic sphere. Within this private space reading could be confined to serious genres such as essays and sermons in the (masculine) study and to "higher" forms of morally sound novels at the (feminine) hearth. The danger of sensation literature, therefore, was that it was, in form, content, and readership, a literature of transgression. It circulated between classes; it passed over boundaries of private and public; it threatened to expose as well as to break down and make meaningless those very differences. As one reviewer ended his article in 1865, Mary Braddon "may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of

psychological and physiological theories of mental disorder in the nineteenth century, see Kayman 178.

²⁶ [Margaret Oliphant], "Novels", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* CII (September 1867): 258.

the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room".²⁷ When Margaret Oliphant claimed that sensation novels are producing a new kind of middle-class heroine with "this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness for physical sensation", she exposed her fear of the threat of such transgression, for she argues

when it is added that the class thus represented does not disown the picture - that, on the contrary it hangs it up in the boudoir and drawing room - that the books which contain it circulate everywhere, and are read everywhere, and are not contradicted - then the case becomes much more serious.²⁸

Mansell, too, moves from images of disease to images of the market place. Unlike the poet, for the sensation novelist, "no divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of his work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply".²⁹ Mansell then proceeds with an elaborate metaphor comparing the sensation novel with the production of cloth: "a commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made - so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season" (483). Both the images of disease and commerce enter into the discourses of class and gender, the one more explicitly than the other. The excitement of the nervous system was by association feminine; the opposition is thereby established of nerves and judgement, body and mind. "The fashions of the current season" (483) were conventionally the preoccupation of women. The figure of the woman who linked the lower class, commerce, the body, and disease, literally

²⁷ [W. Fraser Ray], "Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon", *North British Review* 43 (September 1865): 204.

²⁸ Oliphant, "Novels" 259.

²⁹ For a discussion of the sensation novel as a manufactured item, see Kayman 174.

and metaphorically, was the prostitute.³⁰ Implicitly, then, the writing of “this class” of novel was a form of prostitution, and could not, as a result, be taken seriously alongside literature which made claims to “inspiration and immortality” (483). Mansell reinforces this idea in the next paragraph where he points out that the production of the sensation “phenomenon” is largely the result of periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls, all of which encourage reading of “an ephemeral interest”. The solidity and authority of eternal truths give way before the chancy and fleeting encounters with “the class of works which most men borrow and do not buy, and in which, therefore, they take only a transitory interest” (484). Although books might be purchased at the railway bookstall, their interest, too, is limited, “offering their customers, something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dulness [*sic*] of a journey” (485). Sensation novels, it would seem, are to be connected discursively with the sexualized and diseased feminine body, especially that of the prostitute with its ephemeral pleasures as opposed to the solid lasting worth of marriage and the domestic hearth embodied in “serious” literature.

The ephemerality of such reading material is further linked by Mansell to the body in terms of appetite, and what is good or bad, natural or unnatural. As well as habit forming novel reading is addictive. With such novels

written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence, it is natural that they should have recourse to rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening the interest of their readers, striving to act as the dram or the dose, rather than as the solid food, because the effect is more immediately perceptible. And as the perpetual cravings of the dram-drinker or the valetudinarian for spirits or physic are hardly intelligible to the man of sound

³⁰ See above, Chapter 2. For another reading of this passage, one which places Mansel’s argument in a discourse of mass culture and mass consumption, but, as with my argument, marks the sensation novel as a feminine form, see Pykett 30-32.

health and regular appetites, so, to one called from more wholesome studies to survey the wide field of sensational literature, it is difficult to realise the idea which its multifarious contents necessarily suggest, that these books must form the staple mental food of a very large class of readers. (485)³¹

Once again we have a sense of topography, a move from the private sphere of “wholesome studies” into the wider public space of sensation literature and the contagion of the streets. Writing such as this was both the cause of disease, and the source of its temporary relief, the medicine which in overdose served to poison: “If the name of a novel can carry down, with readers of this class, the bitter pill of solid merit, it may easily have its influence in seasoning the less unpalatable morsel of trash” (485).

Such an act of “discursive rejection” was echoed in similar terms by Margaret Oliphant.³² By constructing the reader as consumer, she invoked not only connotations of the marketplace and commerciality, but also the image of bodily appetite, for the idea of “taste” connects both refinement and good manners and the physical act of eating or drinking:

we do not gulp down the evil of them ... on the contrary, we swallow the poorest literary drivel ... and as for good taste, or elegance, or perception of character, these are things that do not tell upon the sensation novel.³³

³¹ Braddon herself has her character Sigismund Smith, a writer of sensation fiction, use a similar metaphor: “‘Why, you see, the penny public require excitement,’ said Mr. Smith; ‘and in order to get the excitement up to a strong point, you’re obliged to recourse to bodies. ... And when you’ve once had recourse to the stimulant of bodies, you’re like a man who’s accustomed to strong liquors, and to whose vitiated palate simple drinks seem flat and wishy-washy. I think there ought to be a literary temperance pledge by which the votaries of the ghastly and melodramatic school might bind themselves to the renunciation of the bowl and dagger, the midnight rendezvous, the secret grave dug by lantern-light under a black grove of cypress, the white-robed figure gliding in the grey gloaming athwart a lonely church-yard, and all the alcoholic elements of fiction’”, Mary Braddon, *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) 42.

³² This term is used by Stallybrass and White 124.

³³ Oliphant, “Novels” 261.

For Stallybrass and White the market place is *the* site of transgression. Not only an intersection of the outside, the wider world of production, with the inside, the market itself with its illusion of a bounded space, the market place or fair was a hybrid form, a site of both commercial transaction and pleasure. They trace how gradually fairs in Europe were suppressed for being a threat to order, as places of "idleness, dissipation, disorder and debauchery", the official criticism which they describe as "the demonized terms for the topology which Bakhtin celebrated, from the perspective of the low, as the grotesque".³⁴ But their ungendered account might equally be taken further and shown to be contingent on the female body and how notions of refinement connected to the ideal of feminine behaviour are placed in opposition to a grotesque female sexuality. Images such as these are connected in a review written in 1866 of Wilkie Collins' *Armada*:

Bigamy is just now [the sensation novel's] typical form. Miss Braddon first brought the type into fashion. No novel can now possibly succeed without it. In real life money is sometimes obtained by marriage, but in literature only by bigamy. When Richardson, the showman, went about with his menagerie he had a big black baboon, whose habits were so filthy, and whose behaviour was so disgusting, that respectable people constantly remonstrated with him for exhibiting such an animal. Richardson's answer invariably was: "Bless you, if it wasn't for that big black baboon I should be ruined; it attracts all the young girls in the country." Now bigamy has been Miss Braddon's big black baboon, with which she has attracted all the young girls in the country. And now Mr. Wilkie Collins has set up a big black baboon on his own account. His big black baboon is Miss Gwilt, a bigamist, thief, gaol-bird, forgeress, murderess, and suicide. This beats all Miss Braddon's big black baboons put together, and the interesting creature is brought forward under the plea of religion. ... But besides the big black baboon there are a number of small baboons and monkeys, for by no stretch of language can they be called human creatures. The most prominent are a hag, who paints and enamels women's faces, and a doctor, whose services, when we are at first introduced to him, are apparently principally required by painted women. Lying, cheating, intriguing, and dreaming strange dreams are the characteristics of

³⁴ Stallybrass and White 34.

these animals. Some of them keep diaries, and some of them yachts.³⁵

This passage is worth quoting at length because it is frequently noted in commentaries upon the sensation novel, usually, I would suspect, for its sensation value. Its underlying associations are not so usually commented upon.³⁶ Here we have intersecting discourses of literary and moral standards, the fair ground and its connotation of both commerciality and immorality, feminine purity, animality, and an underlying current of illicit and unmentionable sexuality.³⁷ The repetition of the key phrase "big black baboon" emphasizes the writer's disgust at the same time as exhibiting a fascination with the creature. According to Stallybrass and White, animals were exploited in fairgrounds for their imitation of human behaviour. Their actions would "imitate European forms of culture or politeness and amusingly transgress, as well as reaffirm, the boundaries between high and low, human and animal, domestic and savage, polite and vulgar".³⁸ By the end of the passage, there is a merging of the animal and the human, a hybridization, as the baboon becomes in turn an unnatural woman, a hag and a doctor, all of whom are involved in

³⁵ Wise, "Belles Lettres" 270. The passage follows that on the sensation mania cited above.

³⁶ See, for example, Altick 150 (no comment made); Helsinger et al. 124 ("Even the sacred realm of womanhood is implicated. What are Victorians to think, for example when they read in *Westminster Review* ..."); Hughes 36 ("An unfavourable notice ... cites without comment an intriguing and suggestive instance ..."; "the sensation novelists' audience found a perverse attraction in their horrific wares"). However, Taylor 8, and Boyle 225-6, go further. See notes below.

³⁷ Taylor claims that sensation novels' "deviant critical status" depended in part on the way they explored "the instability of social and psychic identity" through "an unhealthy interest in deviant or abnormal figures, above all, transgressive women". She alludes to the passage without quoting it: "The *Westminster Review* attacked *Armada* for exhibiting its pathological characters as specimens like freaks at a fairground", 8.

³⁸ Stallybrass and White 41. They discuss not only the exhibition of animals but also those of other races, "the West Indian and the Zulu", as example of "the Other ... transformed into the Same". This has implications for the passage under discussion since the repetition of "black" could have associations of race. See Sandor Gilman, *Difference and Pathology - Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, for a discussion of nineteenth-century connections between race, women, and assumptions of "unnatural" sexuality. Boyle, too, in reference to the passage, argues that "images of disease, bestiality, and sex occur and recur in the context of 'blackness'", and that "this is a review which seems to have evolution and cultural relativism on its mind as much as story telling", 225, 226.

some way with distorting the “respectable” feminine body into a site of grotesque and unnatural sexuality, a sexuality associated with illness, even madness, since sensation novels themselves, according to the reviewer, are a “virus”, an “endemic”, and a “mania”.³⁹

The writing of reviews, therefore, was an exercise which reached out way beyond the ostensible purpose of literary criticism, through the construction of public taste, to the regulation and well being of the middle class, and especially of the female, body. Stallybrass and White argue that the production of manners and ways of regulating the body,

become the site of a profound interconnection of ideology and subjectivity, a zone of transcoding at once astonishingly trivial and microscopically important. Traversed by regulative forces quite beyond its conscious control, the body is territorialized in accordance with hierarchies and topographical rules which it enacts automatically, which come from elsewhere and which make it a point of intersection and flow within the elaborate symbolic systems of the socius.⁴⁰

In the sensation novel as described by the reviewers was expressed, at one and the same time, a fear of and a fascination with the excesses and transgressions of the “low”, the popular, and the grotesque body.

Seduction and Resistance

The process of expressing fear and fascination can be seen in the way “sensation” is overtly rejected yet at the same time incorporated or embodied in the texts. At times the reviewers appropriate methods used by sensation writers to catch the reader’s attention, such as the use of sensational images (like the

³⁹ Wise, “Belles Lettres” 269.

⁴⁰ Stallybrass and White 90.

baboon) or by dwelling at length on the very subjects they are condemning with a kind of "phobic enchantment".⁴¹ For Mansell the aim of sensation literature "is to produce temporary excitement" while "the unchanging principles of philosophy", the "thing of beauty" that "is a joy for ever" (486), would be out of place in it. He links the idea of excitement and "preaching to the nerves" with a literal reading of sensation itself, as a physical reaction, in the way that D. A. Miller sees as being ignored more lately when "an overnice literary criticism wishfully reassures us that these domineering texts, whose power is literally proved upon our pulses, are beneath notice".⁴² According to Mansell,

a great philosopher has enumerated in a list of sensations "the feelings from heat, electricity, galvanism, &c.," together with "titillation, sneezing, horripilation, shuddering, the feeling of setting teeth on edge, &c.;" and our novels might be classified in like manner, according to the kind of sensation they are calculated to produce. (487)

Warming to his subject he continues the body imagery:

There are novels of the warming-pan, and others of the galvanic-battery type - some which gently stimulate a particular feeling, and others which carry the whole nervous system by steam. There are some which tickle the vanity of the reader, and some which aspire to set his hair on end or his teeth on edge; while others, with or without the intention of the writer, are strongly provocative of that sensation in the palate and throat which is a premonitory symptom of nausea. (487)

With the latter image we are returned to the idea of illness, for in employing an image of the body and its physical sensations, Mansell, more often than not, links these sensations with unpleasantness, a displeasure of and with the text. He finds, therefore, sensation novels written "merely for amusement" "less

⁴¹ Stallybrass and White 124.

⁴² Miller 147.

offensive" than those written "for a didactic purpose", "as it is more pleasant that the exhilaration of a noisy evening should be forgotten in the morning than that it should leave its remembrance in the form of a headache" (487). Such disgust, according to Stallybrass and White, "was inseparable from refinement: whilst it designated the 'depraved' domain of the poor, it simultaneously established the purified domain of the bourgeoisie".⁴³

In Mansell's argument, the contemporaneity of the sensation novel "aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader" because "we are thrilled with horror, even in fiction, by the thought that such things may be going on around us and among us" (489). In a long elaboration of this point, detailing the types of people whose appearance may conceal hidden wickedness, Mansell not only echoes Mary Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret*, but employs those very methods of "sensationalism" which he is condemning:⁴⁴

The man who shook our hand with a hearty English grasp half an hour ago - the woman whose beauty and grace were the charm of last night, and whose gentle words sent us home better pleased with the world and with ourselves - how exciting to think that under these pleasing outsides may be concealed some demon in human shape, a Count Fosco or a Lady Audley! He may have assumed all that heartiness to conceal some dark plot against our life or honour, or against the life or honour of one yet dearer: she may have left that gay scene to muffle herself in a thick veil and steal to a midnight meeting with some villainous accomplice. (489)

Despite the element of parody in this passage, the use of the inclusive first person pronoun "we" implies that Mansell as well as the reader is experiencing the thrill he describes, and, moreover, enjoying the ambiguity of being what Miller terms "a suspicious character".⁴⁵ The very next image is employed to

⁴³ Stallybrass and White 140.

⁴⁴ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862; London: Virago, 1985) 46, 121, for example.

⁴⁵ Miller 162.

control such tendencies to excess: "All this is no doubt very exciting; but even excitement may be purchased too dearly; and we may be permitted to doubt whether the pleasure of a nervous shock is worth the cost of so much morbid anatomy if the picture be true, or so much slanderous misrepresentation if it be false" (489). As Stallybrass and White argue in another context, an "apparently simple gesture of social superiority and disdain", such as Mansell's denial of pleasurable sensation, "could not be effectively accomplished without revealing the very labour of suppression and sublimation involved".⁴⁶

A similar sense of abhorrence and fascination is evident on occasions in the reviews of Margaret Oliphant. In her description of the new kind of heroine she found appearing in the novels of the 1860s, she reproduced the "many thrills of feeling" she set out to condemn:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record. Women driven wild with love for the man who leads them on to desperation before he accords that word of encouragement which carries them into the seventh heaven; women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion; women who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate; women, at the very least of it, who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream, either waiting for or brooding over the inevitable lover, - such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction.⁴⁷

Although Oliphant dislikes "the fleshly and unlovely record" it is upon aspects of the body that she chooses to linger. She continues in a similar fashion. The heroine is no longer enticed by an ending made "pleasantly in a wholesome wedding, or pathetically in a violet-covered grave". Nowadays she waits "for

⁴⁶ Stallybrass and White 124.

⁴⁷ Oliphant, "Novels" 259. The novels she describes here include Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne*, and Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh up as a Flower*.

flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions, which she indicates to the world with a charming frankness". For Oliphant the subject is made worse because it is women writers who produce them. "Were the sketch made from the man's point of view, its openness would at least be less repulsive".⁴⁸ But it is "women who describe those sensuous raptures ... this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness for physical sensation" and "the fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real" is what disturbed her.⁴⁹ Yet in her attempt to regulate the female body and the female voice, Oliphant places herself in an ambiguous position. Not only does she show that she is as capable as the women writers at producing their kind of sensationalism, by reproducing its style in her article, but by writing anonymously she disguises the fact that she, too, is a woman, writing. Thus she is part of the transgression she attempts to expose, that women are writing on subjects "repulsive" even from the pens of men, and "imported" into the pure English novel, and not very well at that:

Such writers are purely, characteristically English. They are not brilliantly wicked like their French contemporaries. The consciousness of good and evil hangs about them, a kind of literary fig-leaf, a little better or worse than nothing.⁵⁰

The Classification of the Text

In placing the English novel favourably beside the French, Oliphant constructed a hierarchy of values implicit in all the reviews of the period. Already we have seen how the sensation novel was condemned for its

⁴⁸ Oliphant, "Novels" 259.

⁴⁹ Oliphant, "Novels" 260.

⁵⁰ Oliphant, "Novels" 261.

ephemerality, by which more solidity and worth was granted to "more serious" literature. Mansell goes further and imposes a hierarchy upon sensation writing itself, again in terms of the body. For this he uses a Darwinian model, to construct a discourse of social stratification and class. Throughout his article he returns to the image of the scientist, an anatomist, examining the body of the sensation text, in which "there may be traced certain minor differences constituting a distinction of species" (487). And in his anatomizing of the different kinds of sensation novel, it is for those of "the lower order" (512) that Mansell reserves his greatest condemnation and most virulent descriptions. Yet, once again, as in his interest in criminal types, he displays a tendency to the very sensationalism he attempts to expose. If the "higher order" of sensation fiction can claim little literary merit, the "lower order" can claim none. However Mansell evinces the need to take "some notice of the cheap publications which supply sensation for the million [*sic*] in penny and halfpenny numbers" (505). He legitimizes his task by once more using the metaphor of the anatomical scientist: "indirectly, they belong to our subject, as the anatomy of the skeleton frame belongs to the surgical treatment of the living body" (505). Cheap serial publications

are the original germ, the primitive monad, to which all the varieties of sensational literature may be referred as their source, by a law of generation at least as worthy of the attention of the scientific student as that by which Mr. Darwin's bear may be supposed to have developed into the whale. (505-6)

To claim that the penny dreadful is the origin of the sensation species, however, is surely another way of condemning its more mature form, the flesh on "the skeleton frame". Somehow "the lower orders", an image in itself redolent of class, poverty, and proliferation, manage to reveal that which the "higher orders" disguise, a strange claim to make about a kind of literature which by its very nature is predicated upon concealment. In these "rudimental forms",

Mansell expounds, "we have sensationism pure and undisguised, exhibited in its naked simplicity, stripped of the rich dress which conceals while it adorns the figure of the more ambitious varieties of the species" (506). Thus the body of the text is to be laid bare, but not, I would argue, in the interests of science, but more like a literary voyeurism, disguised as wholesome medicine, the reader invited like the guests at Charcot's lectures at the Salpêtrière, curious to observe the women case studies of hysteria:⁵¹

A few specimens will serve the purposes of study better than many descriptions. The reader is requested to observe the compact structure of the sentences, as well as the exciting nature of the theme. In these infinitesimal doses is contained the whole virtue of sensationism, as surely as the virtue of a homeopathic medicine is contained in the concentrated globule, whatever may be the volume of water in which it is diluted. (506)

What follows are six pages of "raw" text interspersed with four short paragraphs linking text and commentary. The passages selected are notable for their insistence on bodily sensations, sexuality and passion that torments, consumes, suffers and despairs: in one the heroine's love "seemed as though it would burst the confines of her bosom with its swelling emotions" (507), and in another "bewildered, excited, astounded, overwhelmed by the mastery over him, which from the first she had seized, and to the last maintained, [the hero] gave way to an ebullition of frantic emotion, and flung himself upon the ground with all the wildness and frenzy of a maniac" (510). The tone of the linking paragraphs, on the other hand, is ironic and mocking, pointing out for the reader that these passages depict "the gentle loves of the aristocracy, and the lawless violence of plebeian life" (507), "a plebeian scene" (508), "a fraternity of thieves"

⁵¹ For a description of these "performances", see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987) 148. I would note here that one of the problems faced in analyzing material such as these reviews is how to avoid becoming caught in the same web of metaphors, sensationalizing and hystericizing my own text.

(509), and that “this specimen belongs to one of the lower forms of sensational life” (509). The kind of treatment received, therefore, by the texts perceived as being of and for “the lower orders” is very different from the relative gentility of approach and polite discussion of those of, for and about the middle classes earlier in the article.⁵²

In Mansell’s writing, the textual body under investigation is approached with the manners reserved for its assumed audience and is constituted in the terms of that audience. Thus while sensation literature as a whole is seen as disease, a corrupting influence, it was a disease which not only spread from, but was more prevalent among, the working class. Sensation writing was transgressive. As a hybrid form it threatened the rigid boundaries between high and low, as contagion could spread from a lower class to an upper class suburb. Stallybrass and White would argue that “it is no accident, then, that transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself”.⁵³ The virulent and derogatory images used by Mansell all evoke the transgressive and demonstrate the power of sensation novels to provoke such a reaction. In this way, a popular literary form although socially marginalized or held as apparently unimportant by the literary critics can also be symbolically central, and invoke images of the grotesque. Of didactic sensationalism, Mansell comments: “to think of pointing a moral by stimulants of this kind is like holding a religious

⁵² The irony is, of course, that both the “higher” and the “lower” orders of sensation writing were the products of middle-class publishing houses. Braddon herself churned out numbers for the penny papers. Her novel *Rupert Godwin* appeared originally as *The Banker’s Secret* in weekly parts in the *Halfpenny Journal*, and was republished in three decker form only after her reputation was established. However, even she was aware of a gradation in the kinds of plots expected by different audiences. See the comments of Sigismund Smith, sensation writer, in *The Doctor’s Wife*, 10-13, 41-44.

⁵³ Stallybrass and White 26.

service in a gin-palace" (502). Of the kind of novels fictionalizing cases from the law courts, he maintains:

there is something unspeakably disgusting in this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathesome dainty before the scent has evaporated. (502)

And, in the end, he can find no remedy for this "disease":

Regarding these works merely as an efflorescence, as an eruption, indicative of the state of health of the body in which they appear, the existence of an impure or a silly crop of novels, and the fact that they are eagerly read, are by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society. (512)

Nevertheless, "even if no remedy can be found, it is something to know the disease. There is a satisfaction in exposing an impostor, even when we feel sure the world will continue to believe in him" (513). Yet is this not also one of the satisfactions felt by the reader of the sensation novel? In his eagerness to expose sensation fiction as a sham, Mansell echoes Robert Audley and numerous other detectives, amateur and professional, in their search to discover "the truth". His intentions and often his methods can therefore be said to mimic the form of that which he so despised.

It might seem that a discussion of class has moved away from the sensation novel and its relationship to the feminine body, but this is not so. I would agree with Stallybrass and White when they write that "within the symbolic discourse of the bourgeoisie, illness, disease, poverty, sexuality, blasphemy and the lower classes were inextricably connected".⁵⁴ I have already shown that the figure linking these ideas is that of the prostitute. In a recent discussion of the gothic

⁵⁴ Stallybrass and White 167.

novel and popular culture, similar connections have been made.⁵⁵ Attention is drawn to the criticism of the popular novel and the idea of trade, of women as writers and consumers of the novel:

“Trade” establishes a distinction between two types of literary labor: that of women, sullied by the profit motive and so compelled to pander to popular taste, and that of men, necessarily commercial but committed to aesthetic principle rather than economic self-interest.⁵⁶

What is similar between the reception of the gothic novel and that of the sensation novel is that images of disease occur in the discussions of both. According to Mudge, “the Gothic novel - sexually suggestive and dominated by women writers and readers - sparked a crucial debate about the pleasures of popular fiction. ... Gothic fiction was depicted both as prostituting itself to popular taste and as embodying aesthetic diseases capable of infecting the body politic”.⁵⁷ By comparing the debate on gothic fiction with that on prostitution by writers such as Michael Ryan and William Acton, he concludes that by “isolating, containing, and policing the female Gothic, [the romantic reviewers] feminized popular culture to ensure the purity of serious literature”.⁵⁸ During the course of the nineteenth century, new social, political, and economic alliances between the aspiring middle and the older governing classes, differentiating themselves from the lower class, encouraged ideas of art and literature which transformed the novel from “suspect commodity” into “literary artifact”. “Once legitimate”, Mudge claims, “the novel disowned its origins - in the sordid, threatening, and feminized world of popular culture - and took its

⁵⁵ Bradford K. Mudge, “The Man with Two Brains: Gothic Novels, Popular Culture, Literary History”, *PMLA* 107.1 (1992): 92-104.

⁵⁶ Mudge 96.

⁵⁷ Mudge 98.

⁵⁸ Mudge 100.

place in the ahistorical, apolitical stratosphere of high art".⁵⁹ The process of differentiation, I would add, continued in the reception of the sensation novel.⁶⁰

The sensation novel in the early 1860s was almost synonymous with the works of Mary Braddon. *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* can be seen as the sites of a multiplicity of transgressions. Braddon, as a woman, was treated with suspicion for both her knowledge of and her writing about the public masculine sphere. Her novels transgressed the bounds of content and form, dealing with subjects such as bigamy and murder, as well as frequently calling the reader's attention to the manner of the novels' production and moving beyond the locale of the novel of "realism". But it was her heroines who incurred the greatest notoriety. For a discussion of the oppositional constructions of Victorian womanhood, the angel and the demon, the natural and unnatural woman, and the disciplining and surveillance of the pathologized feminine body, we must turn to *Lady Audley* and *Aurora Floyd*.

⁵⁹ Mudge 101.

⁶⁰ The sensation novel as a domestication of the gothic was noted from the first. See Jeni Curtis, "'An Englishman's Home is his Castle': Mary Braddon and the Gothic Tradition", in *Victorian Gothic, Australasian Victorian Studies Association: Sydney Conference Papers, 1992*, eds. Penny Gay and Judith Johnson (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1992): 89-94.

Chapter 11

Mary Braddon's Two Lucys: The Secret Life of the Hollow Body

Woman? "Doesn't exist." She borrows the disguise which she is required to assume. She mimes the role imposed upon her. The only thing really expected of her is that she *maintain, without fail, the circulation of pretence by enveloping herself in femininity*. Luce Irigaray, "Des marchandises entre elles".¹

Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist. What is left is unthinkable, unthought of. Hélène Cixous, "Sorties".²

Do not laugh at poor Robert because he grew hypochondriacal, after hearing the horrible story of his friend's death. There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling; mad to-day and sane to-morrow. ... Who has not been, or is not to be, mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance? Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* ³

"I will go straight to the arch-conspirator, and will tear away the beautiful veil under which she hides her wickedness, and will wring from her the secret of my friend's fate, and banish her for ever from the house which her presence has polluted" (217). So claims Robert Audley as he relentlessly pursues his quest for truth, to discover the reason for his friend's disappearance, and to uncover the mystery of his uncle's wife's appearance, a mystery somehow apparent only to Robert, since other characters take her at her face value.⁴ Surface and depth, secrecy and knowledge, perception and misperception, deception and truth are

¹ Luce Irigaray, "Des marchandises entre elles", *New French Feminisms*, ed. and with introduction Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Sussex: Harvester, 1981) 108, emphasis in original.

² Hélène Cixous, "Sorties" 64.

³ Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* 341. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

⁴ It might be argued that Phoebe and Luke Marks are aware too that Lady Audley has secrets she wishes to hide, but for them these secrets are not hidden as they are to Robert. The two act as part of her conspiracy, using their knowledge to further their own ambition and greed through blackmail.

the founding oppositions at play in *Lady Audley's Secret*; the belief that meaning is immanent and, as in the Gothic tradition upon which Braddon so evidently draws, veiled, a mystery to be revealed. But at the same time, it is this very belief that *Lady Audley's Secret* can also be seen to be questioning. In the tradition of Poe's "The Purloined Letter", the novel destabilizes the certainties of a signified truth, and unsettles the neat balance of the oppositions it appears to uphold.⁵ Previous critical analyses of *Lady Audley's Secret* have centred around two related ideas, the significance of Lady Audley's madness, and the subversive nature of the novel. But for all readers the question must remain: what is Lady Audley's secret?

"Mad to-day, sane tomorrow"

Within the plot of the novel there are many answers to that question. Lady Audley is not what she seems, and has, in fact, many secrets. We suspect, and then discover, during the process of Robert Audley's detective work, that she is not only Lady Audley, but Helen Talboys, that she is a bigamist, that she tried to murder her first husband, that she attempted to incinerate Robert by setting fire to the inn where he is staying. But it is also made clear from her confession that what Lady Audley regards as her secret is the hereditary taint of madness, a disorder she inherited from her mother. At first sight this would allow us a simple reading of the novel. Lady Audley would fit the stereotype I have described in the chapter on prostitution, her illness linked with sexuality, disease and contagion. The text is very open to such a reading. Robert associates Lady Audley with pollution. He thinks of her as a temptress, a sorceress, and tells her:

⁵ Martin A. Kayman has also made the link between *Lady Audley's Secret* and Poe's "The Purloined Letter"; see Kayman 183.

"Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman. ... I now look upon you as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle. But you shall no longer pollute the place by your presence." (292)

He dreams of her as a mermaid "beckoning his uncle to destruction" (210), and George describes her (his wife Helen) as "for all the world like one of those what's-its-names, who got poor old Ulysses into trouble" (30). Braddon makes use of the coded language of prostitution to mark Lady Audley as a sexually transgressive woman: "But how terribly that narrow pathway had widened out into the broad high road of sin, and how swift her footsteps had been upon the now familiar way!" (254). When Alicia hears that her stepmother has been banished, she assumes Lady Audley's disgrace is sexual, her blush a sign to the reader:

Alicia's face, which had been pale before, flushed crimson. ... This sorrow must surely then have arisen from some sudden discovery: it was, no doubt, a sorrow associated with disgrace. Robert Audley understood the meaning of that vivid blush. (306)

The perceptions of female madness in the novel are also connected with sexuality. Lady Audley's "actual" madness, as differentiated from her "social" madness, is a disorder inherited from her mother.⁶ As a child she imagines her mother in the madhouse:

I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother's madness. It haunted me by day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs. I had exaggerated ideas of the horror of her situation. I had no knowledge of the different degrees of madness; and the image that haunted me was that of a distraught and violent creature, who would fall upon me and kill me if I came within her reach. This idea grew upon me until I used to awake in the dead of the night, screaming aloud in an agony of

⁶ The distinction between these two will be explained, and her "social" madness discussed below.

terror, from a dream in which I felt my mother's icy grasp upon my throat, and heard her ravings in my ear. (295)

Here we have the madwoman in the tradition of Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, and one construct of women's sexuality as excessive, animalistic, and dangerous, to be contained only by incarceration. On the other hand, what Lady Audley finds when she finally meets her mother is a non-threatening, girlish Ophelia figure:

I saw no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us, with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter. (296)⁷

As elsewhere in the novel, the oppositions here are marked, between the transgressive, impassioned demonic woman and the passionless "normality" of the angelic madwoman. Her mother's madness was "a hereditary disease transmitted from her mother, who had died mad" (296), and it had appeared only after the birth of her daughter. Whether or not this is a form of postpartum depression is not so important as the significance of this form of madness in the construction of women's sexuality. If, in the Actonian model, women's desire is expressed only through motherhood, then the mother's madness is a complex denial of acceptable feminine sexuality. Lady Audley, although she does not succumb to the same madness at the birth of her child, is shown to be lacking in maternal desire when she abandons her son, and admits she did not love him. Her connection with her mother is made implicitly when she returned from, as

⁷ See Sandor Gilman, *Seeing the Insane: A cultural history of madness and art in the western world* (New York: John Wiley, 1982) 126, 208, for nineteenth-century romantic images of Ophelia and love melancholy. By interesting coincidence, Plate 277, entitled *Faim, Folie, Crime*, painted in 1864 by a Belgian artist, depicts a madwoman in this tradition committing infanticide - a comment on the mad mother and the social origins of insanity, 209.

we discover only later, her attempted murder of George: "She had a heap of wild autumn flowers in the skirt of her muslin dress" (67).

If, therefore, Lady Audley's madness is linked with her sexuality, how is it that Winifred Hughes can claim, quite rightly, that Lady Audley is "unencumbered by any active sexuality of her own", or that Lady Audley herself could confess that "the common temptations that assail and shipwreck some women had no terror for me. I would have been your true and pure wife to the end of time, though I had been surrounded by a legion of tempters. The mad folly that the world calls love had never any part in my madness" (300)?⁸ The answer lies in the way Lady Audley is constructed almost totally as a projection of male perceptions, as the object of male desire, and as a text to be read. As a result she appears not so much as a complex character but a complexity of characters, seemingly contradictory in their polarization, the angel and the demon.⁹ To the people of the village she is the epitome of selfless passionless Victorian womanhood. With her infantilized bloneness "wherever she went she seemed to take sunshine and gladness with her". Her "very childishness had a charm which few could resist. The innocence and candour of an infant beamed in Lady Audley's fair face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all gave to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. She owned to twenty years of age, but it was hard to believe her more than seventeen" (44).

⁸ Hughes 127. I cannot agree with Virginia B. Morris who claims that Lady Audley's bigamy carries "overtones of sexual excess", Morris 95. Her bigamy is for social, not sexual reasons.

⁹ In my discussion of the apparently dual faces of angel and demon I cannot but be indebted to Nina Auerbach's revisionary reading of these two figures as part of Victorian iconography. Of *Lady Audley's Secret* Auerbach writes, "Braddon employs with scholarly precision angelic iconography for demonic purposes throughout the novel ... Lady Audley and her mermaidlike sisters need not show a tail or awaken to a suddenly hairy hand: their angelic faces and natures become demonic with a shift of the viewer's perspective". Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1982) 107-8. However, as I will argue below, I do not necessarily read the demonic as a source of power.

But if the angelic figure is all surface innocence, the very lack of guile, her portrait presents a different perception of womanhood, the idea that Lady Audley's exterior is a beautiful mask of some deeper mystery and potential. The portrait is kept in Lady Audley's private apartment, a series of rooms redecorated for her by Sir Michael, "a fairy-like boudoir" (25) entered through a large octagonal anteroom hung from floor to ceiling with paintings and mirrors, a fitting setting to reflect the object of his adoration. This inner sanctum, at the centre of the labyrinthine house, could be seen as symbolic of my lady herself, a closed off sanctuary, a place of surface images, constructed to reflect her from many angles rather than reveal the hollow at the core:

Every evidence of womanly refinement [piano, easel, embroidery] was visible in the elegant chamber ... while the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in this image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber. (251)

The apartment is kept locked by Lady Audley, and Robert and George gain access to it only through the gothic trappings of a secret passageway, shown to them by Alicia. Thus the men penetrate her secrecy as spies, gazing into her, so to speak, an invasion of which she is unaware, a violation of her privacy of self.¹⁰ Neither, as far as they are aware, has seen my lady, apart from a brief glimpse Robert caught of her in the darkened carriage. The painting, in its radical representation of Lady Audley, is the first direct intimation that she

¹⁰ Little is made in critical analyses of the architecture of this room and its illicit penetration by the men, apart from in the introduction to the Virago edition, where it is coyly commented that "it can only be reached by means of a secret tunnel, entered by a trapdoor in- of all places - a corner of the nursery. No wonder we post-Freudians feel a sense of violation", xix. Nothing at all is remarked upon of Alicia's collusion in the men's actions. See however, Lyn Pykett 91-92. Pykett's chapter on Braddon agrees with my reading of Braddon's works on many points and she comes to similar conclusions. Her book, however, came to my notice after I had written this chapter.

might have an alternative story.¹¹ The woman portrayed is sexualized, the angelic passionless features becoming sensual and demonic; the blond complexion takes on "a lurid brightness", the eyes "a strange, sinister light" and the "pretty pouting mouth" a "hard and almost wicked look"; "my lady, in his portrait of her, had the aspect of a beautiful fiend" (60). The details of the painting connect her with red and with fire, associated with the scarlet woman, witches and hell, indications of passion, sensuality, as well as male fear of female sexual transgression. The background, a reproduction of the anteroom with its mirrors and paintings, keeps her forever locked in a narcissistic prison of her own reflection:

Her crimson dress, exaggerated like all the rest in this strange picture, hung about her in folds that looked like flames, her fair head rising out of the lurid mass of colour, as if out of a raging furnace. Indeed, the crimson dress, the sunshine on the face, the red gold gleaming in the yellow hair, the ripe scarlet of the pouting lips, the vivid colour of each accessory in the minutely-painted background, all combined to render the first effect of the painting by no means an agreeable one. (60-61)

The description of the painting has a destabilizing effect. It calls into question not only the characters' but also the reader's perception of Lady Audley at this point in the plot. Which is she - angel or fiend? Where lies the truth in the painter's representation of my lady? Alicia's comment appears to present the painting as a palimpsest, a double layer, the one the trace of the truth beyond:

¹¹ I would like to thank here Dr Pamela Gerrish Nunn for invaluable discussion concerning this painting and its place within Pre-Raphaelite painting of the period. She has pointed out that Braddon echoes general criticism of Pre-Raphaelite paintings for their exaggeration and "distortion" of the generally accepted portrayal of feminine beauty. It is unlikely that Braddon had any one painting in mind, but obviously knew the work of Frederick Sandys and Holman Hunt (who is mentioned in the text, 251). The painting by Rossetti reproduced on the cover of the Virago edition of the novel is, in fact, anachronistic, in that Rossetti's work of this type had not been shown in 1862. Nevertheless, Braddon's description of the portrait of Lady Audley in many ways anticipates such paintings. See also Morris 162, n. 4.

"I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not perceived by common eyes. *We* have never seen my lady look as she does in that picture: but I think that she *could* look so." (61, emphases in original)

Robert, however, holds to the power of the signified. He asks Alicia not to be "metaphysical" - "don't unsettle me". For him "the picture is - the picture; and my lady is - my lady" (61). But in this he is wrong, for in the novel signifiers are never as fixed as they appear to be. Nothing *is*, but only *seems to be*, in the way that Sir Michael seems to be happy, Lady Audley seems to be young and childlike, Robert seems to be indolent, or George seems to be dead. The destabilizing effect is twofold. Not only are apparent facts and truths within the novel to be regarded with suspicion, but the question arises whether Robert is wrong about other issues in the novel, and the conclusions he draws from them.

Thus Lady Audley *is* none of these representations. The careful reader is repeatedly warned by a text constantly guarded by words such as "seemed", "might have", or "looked like". If, on the one hand, Lady Audley, chameleon-like, is only acting out the roles she perceives are a necessary disguise, or if, on the other, she is merely the product of the male gaze, in either case we are left with the question of who or what is Lady Audley. There is nothing at the centre. In both readings she (or the text) has entered the antifeminist discourse of dichotomous representations of women, always already there to be engaged with, drawn upon or reproduced. In this way Lady Audley is textualized, historicized and universalized. She becomes Everywoman and no woman.

The Novel of Subversion - sanity and signification

However, in the complex entanglement that constitutes discursive intertextuality, *Lady Audley's Secret* can also be read as not reinforcing antifeminist discourse so much as subverting it. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter writes of Braddon's novel in her chapter "Subverting the Feminine Novel - Sensationalism and Feminine Protest".¹² For Showalter, the tradition of women's writing can be divided into three phases, and Braddon's work falls at the end of the first of these, that which she calls the "feminine" phase. Women writers of this period, according to Showalter, were concerned with the "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its view on social roles", and woman sensation novelists wrote to subvert the "feminine" values of the novels of Brontë, Eliot and Gaskell, that is, to question the domestic ideal.¹³

It is in light of this argument that Showalter discusses what I would call the "social" explanation of Lady Audley's madness. Showalter dismisses the medical evidence of Lady Audley's madness, that it is a disorder inherited from her mother, and chooses to emphasize the doctor's first diagnosis to Robert.¹⁴ In this reading Lady Audley can be seen to be someone who has acted according to the letter of the law, who has conformed to the rules of the patriarchal expectation of the role of domestic femininity. She has merely taken it to its logical extreme:

"You would wish to prove that this lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley? ... I do not believe that she is mad. ... Because there is no evidence of madness in anything she has done. She ran away from home, because her home was not

¹² Showalter, *Literature* 153-181.

¹³ Showalter, *Literature* 13, 158-9. For a useful discussion of the limitations of Showalter's analysis, see Pykett 48-50.

¹⁴ Elsewhere Showalter discusses Lady Audley and her mother's madness in the light of contemporary writing on puerperal fever. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* 71-72.

a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. ... I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!" (318, 319, 321)

Thus for Showalter, "as every woman reader must have sensed, Lady Audley's real secret is that she is *sane* and, moreover, representative".¹⁵ My lady had coolheadedly used the system, as she herself explained:

"I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later - I had learnt that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them." (297)

Braddon therefore exposes the danger in and to the domestic angel. To survive or, indeed, succeed in the patriarchal system, a woman must learn "secrecy and deceitfulness, almost as a secondary sex characteristic".¹⁶ To act becomes second nature to Lady Audley, both in the sense of rejecting passive victimization and also in the sense of theatricality:

Insignificant as this action was [someone knocks at the door, and she picks up a book to pretend she has been reading], it spoke very plainly. It spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears - of fatal necessities for concealment - of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than anything else could have told, how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessities of her life. (255)

However, if Lady Audley is sane, she can also be held responsible for her actions and this raises the issue of her criminality. As D. A. Miller argues, "the

¹⁵ Showalter, *Literature* 167, emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Showalter, *Literature* 165.

'secret' let out at the end of the novel is not, therefore, that Lady Audley is a madwoman, but rather that, *whether she is one or not*, she must be treated as such. ... Lady Audley is mad, then, only because she must not be criminal. She must not, in other words, be supposed capable of acting on her own diabolical responsibility and hence of publicly spoiling her assigned role as the conduit of power transactions between men".¹⁷

The subversiveness of the novel, therefore, could be said to lie in the way in which the domestic ideal is undermined, when the angel cannot be trusted and becomes as one contemporary reviewer phrased it "the devil in the house".¹⁸ There is much evidence of this within the text itself. As I have already said, Lady Audley is historicized, placed in a past which proliferated with dangerous, strong women - Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, Marie Antoinette, Catherine de' Medici, Lucretia Borgia (177, 252, 253). There are frequent reminders of the destructive power of women. Robert, for example, "remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since the day upon which Eve was created to be Adam's companion and helpmeet in the garden of Eden" (235). After a long diatribe on the wickedness of women, he concludes:

they riot in battle, and murder, and clamour, and desperation. If they can't agitate the universe and play at ball with hemispheres, they'll make mountains of warfare and vexation out of domestic molehills, and brew social storms in household teacups. ... To call them the weaker sex is a hideous mockery. They are the stronger sex, the noisier, the more persevering, the more self-assertive sex. They want freedom of opinion, variety of occupation, do they? Let them have it. Let them be lawyers, doctors, preachers, teachers, soldiers, legislators - anything they like - but let them be quiet - if they can. (177-178)

¹⁷ Miller 170-1, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Wise, "Belles Lettres" 568.

For Showalter, this monologue is “really a thinly veiled feminist threat that women confined to the home and denied legitimate occupations will turn their frustrations against the family itself”.¹⁹

However, I do not believe that such passages can be read so positively. Certainly these passages move from the public to the domestic face of women, and their effect is to be all-inclusive and definitive - this is what women are like, wherever and whenever in history. And Robert’s poor opinion of women comes to include even Clara, the woman he admires and loves:

“How pitiless these women are to each other,” he thought, ... “what a world it is, and how these women take life out of our hands. Helen Maldon, Lady Audley, Clara Talboys, and now Miss Tonks - all womankind from beginning to end.” (203)

Repeatedly he does not see women as maternal and caring, but consuming and devouring. The notion of “a veiled feminist threat” in these passages is both upheld and at the same time undermined in a number of ways. Firstly, Robert’s reading of women is shown to be fallible, if not comic. Immediately following his monologue, he receives a letter from Clara on which he remarks, “It’s a long letter, I dare say; she’s the kind of woman who would write a long letter - a letter that will urge me on, drive me forwards, wrench me out of myself, I’ve no doubt” (179). In fact the envelope contains two of George’s letters and a curt nine-word instruction from Clara signed only with her initials. Secondly, these passages are almost all put into the mouth of Robert, whose fear of women surely colours the “truth” he constructs about Lady Audley, and complicates his adoration of Clara.²⁰

¹⁹ Showalter, *Literature* 167.

²⁰ See below for a fuller discussion of Robert’s role in the novel.

But most importantly, it would seem that such passages, while appearing to present alternative readings to Lady Audley's angelic role merely reinforce the existing dichotomous representations of womanhood. Rather than subverting the domestic ideal they present its demonic other. To be a woman is to be mad, for in Lady Audley's case, if she is representative, she is neither angel or demon, but both - or nothing. She both transgresses and conforms, or conforms by transgressing, and those women who do not conform to the norms of feminine behaviour are deemed insane. Lady Audley, like a gothic heroine, is finally "buried alive" in "a living grave" (330) of a Belgian *maison de santé*, a fate which does little to distinguish her from good or bad women of the past. Robert Audley tells her, "You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this Catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures to the end" (331). Where is the power of the demonic, then? What is the difference between being a holy or a wicked woman if they both end up immured? As D. A. Miller points out, "*Lady Audley's Secret* thus portrays the woman's carceral condition as her fundamental and final truth".²¹

Showalter claims that Lady Audley shows "unfeminine assertiveness" but it is her very passivity that deceives people. She is assertive, but off-stage, so to speak - the trip to London, pushing George down the well, the arson at the inn are never seen as actions, but reported or inferred, even in her confession. She is constantly objectified by the text. Thus, although her secret and her actions might be, for Showalter, subversive, I find a dual weapon at work. On the one hand, Showalter seems to be right: Lady Audley is representative, even sane. On the other hand, Lady Audley's "acts" are subverted themselves. Not a moralist overtly making her plea as Mrs Henry Wood does at the time of Isabella Vane's adulterous flight in *East Lynne*, Braddon nevertheless imprisons and paralyses

²¹ Miller 171.

Lady Audley as effectively, textually by having her actions as mere reports, and narratively by allowing her to be sent to the *maison de santé* and her death. Thus Showalter's other claim, that Braddon uses madness as a mask for Lady Audley's "unfeminine assertiveness" in order that she be spared "the unpleasant necessity of having to execute an attractive heroine with whom she in many ways identifies, but also to spare the woman reader the guilt of identifying with a cold-blooded killer" flies in the face of textual evidence.²² Lady Audley is executed as effectively by the patriarchal structures that she is claimed to subvert as if she had been brought before a court of law. The discourse is merely shifted from the legal to the medical arena.

Yet the novel as a whole might be described as subversive. Although the status quo prevails, and domesticity is restored at the end, the unsettling doubt still remains, not only about Lady Audley - is this the kind of monster produced by male constructs of desire - but also about Robert. Are we satisfied that his "monomania" is temporary; that the question of his sanity is resolved? Robert's transgression of the boundaries, his unsettling of the lines drawn between madness and sanity are disturbing because he also is representative, as Showalter claims of Lady Audley.

Robert Audley's secret and the triumph of "cool, calculating intellect"

Both Kayman and Taylor discuss the role of Robert Audley in the novel. According to Kayman:

²² Showalter, *Literature* 167. Virginia B. Morris also questions Showalter's reading. However Morris's argument ends up very close to Showalter's when she claims that "Braddon used the insanity device because it allows Lucy Audley to be locked up - not for murder or bigamy or arson but for daring to assert some control over her own life", 97.

Thanks to Lady Audley, Robert finds himself at the centre of a complex web of conflicting desires and obligations: in his running debate with himself as to what he should do, he is torn between his professional duty, his personal apathy, his obligations to Providence, his acknowledged attraction to his aunt, his love and duty to his uncle, and his affection for his friend, George (and for his sister, Clara). The secret that is Lady Audley makes itself felt by fracturing the different codes - personal and public, sexual and familial - which define Robert's modern social position.²³

For Taylor, Lady Audley "becomes the object of disclosure as [Robert] becomes the investigating subject; discovering her secret becomes his passage out of an aristocratic ennui and into middle-class fortitude as he assimilates legal codes and procedures and makes them work".²⁴

What neither of these readings takes into account are the similarities between Robert and Lady Audley. Just as Lady Audley's actions have the question of madness raised about them, so to do Robert's. Another "secret" at the heart of the novel is the way that in the construction of gender difference, the similarities between the sexes must be repressed. In order for Robert to become a man, Lady Audley must be ill and marginalized. His story is that of the making of a patriarch, for the unresolved question of madness, Robert's or Lady Audley's, is the repressed other on which the apparent stability and monolithic structure of patriarchy are based.

At the beginning of the novel Robert might be called "feminine". He is not a man of decision and action. He "unblushingly called himself a barrister" but had never practised his profession, thus being of but not actively participating in the patriarchal order of law. With his "listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute

²³ Kayman 183-4.

²⁴ Taylor 11. Similarly Morris points out that Braddon switches the protagonist of the novel from Lucy to Robert part way through the story, 98. Pykett's reading of Robert's role is very similar to mine, 102-107. She does not, however, account for the destabilizing affect of Robert's (implied) madness.

manner" (27) he exhausts himself reading French novels, a reading habit he shares with Lady Audley but which signifies something different in his case. For my lady her liking of French novels, with their association of wickedness and adulterous sexuality, is an indication of her lack of moral worth.²⁵ For Robert the reading of French novels effectively feminizes him by drawing him into the realm of the feminine/feminized reading public. His lack of overt masculine sexuality is also marked by his being different from other men. He is unambitious, takes no interest in "turning his cousin's girlish liking for him to some good account" (28), and in the hunting season makes only "a feeble show of joining in the sports of the merry assembly". Unlike "the honest young country squires, who talked all breakfast time of Flying Dutchman fillies and Voltigeur colts, of glorious days of seven hours' hard riding over three counties, and of a thirty-mile ride home after dark", Robert is a poor horseman, and is regarded by the male fraternity "as a person utterly unworthy of any remark whatsoever" (98). His uncle thinks of him as "eccentric", and notes "there were some slight differences, not easily to be defined, that separated him from other men of his age and position" (280). Sir Michael finds it, as does Alicia herself, "extraordinary and unnatural in Robert Audley not to have duly fallen in love" (281) with his pretty vivacious cousin. In a novel which seems otherwise fixed in its representation of the oppositional natures of masculine and feminine, Robert, and, I would argue, Lady Audley unsettle that fixity. For before the domestic bliss of the ending can be achieved, where the socio-symbolic order of marriage, the family, and the strict dichotomy of masculine and feminine roles are re-established, both Robert and Lady Audley challenge that order.

²⁵ As well as reading French novels, Lady Audley is connected with them contextually, not always straightforwardly. In one passage Robert tries reading, but "the yellow papered fictions on the shelves above his head seemed stale and profitless - he opened a volume of Balzac, but his uncle's wife's golden curls danced and trembled in a glittering haze, alike upon the metaphysical diablerie of the *Peau de Chagrin*, and the simple pathos of *Eugénie Grandet*" (132). She is thus associated with the "wickedness" of French literature as condemned by Margaret Oliphant, but also given two alternative readings - is hers to be read as diablerie or pathos? Note also that she is textualized (here and in another example below) by Robert.

Robert's coming to terms with his place in the order of things, his achieving of his manhood, is accomplished through his pursuit of Lady Audley's secret. He, of all the characters, suspects her of being what she is not. But his suspicions of Lady Audley arise out of his friendship with George Talboys and it is this friendship that is problematic. Initially he is attracted to Lady Audley:

... for once in his life, Robert was almost enthusiastic.

"She's the prettiest little creature you ever saw in your life ... such blue eyes, such ringlets, such a ravishing smile, such a fairy-like bonnet - all of a tremble with heartsease and dewy spangles, shining out of a cloud of gauze. George Talboys, I feel like the hero of a French novel. I am falling in love with my aunt." (48)

Nevertheless that admiration is short lived, and he later "detextualizes" or dissociates himself from the French novel of adultery both she and he read, when he remarks to her: "You have no sentimental nonsense, no silly infatuation, borrowed from Balzac, or Dumas *films*, to fear from me" (120). As he becomes determined to solve the mystery of George's disappearance, the clues lead him closer and closer to Lady Audley. But why the obsession with George, and what is the nature of his relationship with this man? From their coincidental reunion in a London street, and the news of the death of George's wife, Robert has to take care of George; he feels a sense of responsibility, which is, by implication, feminine:

The big dragoon was as helpless as a baby; and Robert Audley, the most vacillating and unenergetic of men, found himself called upon to act for another. He rose superior to himself and equal to the occasion. (33)²⁶

²⁶ Robert's nurturing nature is also evidenced in his taking in of stray dogs, a sign to other men of his eccentricity. On the other hand, dogs are hostile to Lady Audley.

From then on, until George's disappearance the young men are inseparable, living and travelling together, George's gloom counterpointing Robert's indifference to life, seeing "all pleasure as a negative kind of trouble" (53). After George's disappearance Robert's inaction is replaced with action, born of the unacknowledged emotions and unconscious desire he feels for George:

If any one had ventured to tell Mr. Robert Audley that he could possibly feel a strong affection for any creature breathing, that cynical gentleman would have elevated his eyebrows in supreme contempt at the preposterous notion. Yet here he was, flurried and anxious, bewildering his brain by all manner of conjectures about his missing friend, and, false to every attribute of his nature, walking fast. (70)

However, this desire is never allowed to materialize, at least towards George. It is displaced in two ways. Firstly Robert's desire to solve the mystery of George's disappearance is transformed into the pursuit of Lady Audley's secret. Secondly Robert's love of George is transmuted into love of Clara, his sister. Thus his desire is reaccommodated into the accepted social and sexual order. From his first meeting, Robert is struck how Clara is like George, and that likeness is emphasized in the text. We are told "she was like George Talboys" (160), "he saw that she was very handsome. She had brown eyes, like George's" (168), and in Clara's handwriting with its "clearly-shaped letters" Robert "recognize[d] a feminine resemblance to poor George's hand; neater than his, and more decided than his, but very like, very like" (178). His superficial attraction to his cousin and his aunt is replaced by an admiration of Clara: "His cousin was pretty, his uncle's wife was lovely, but Clara Talboys was beautiful" (170). Where Lucy, Lady Audley, shines with a false light, Clara stands for the transparent clarity of truth. But even when he has fallen in love with Clara, and disposed of Lady Audley, George continues to haunt him. On the level of the plot, the mystery of George is, of course, resolved by his physical return, having survived the attempt on his

life. But in terms of Robert's psychological and sexual development, George's re-embodiment is necessary to allay and finally repress those unnamed anxieties that continue to trouble him. Alone in his chambers Robert debates whether to tell Clara that her brother has been murdered. The passage is marked by the repeated image of haunting. George is a "phantom" (339) which might "invade" Robert's apartments (341), and which "pursued him, even in the comfortable first-class carriage" (342). Robert's desire therefore is a secret violation, a parallel to the violation of Lady Audley's inner sanctum by other inadmissible desires. However, such desires are, by implication, a source of psychic and social disorder. In a direct address to the reader, the narrator echoes Lady Audley's charge that Robert is mad:

Do not laugh at poor Robert because he grew hypochondriacal, after hearing the horrible story of his friend's death. There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling; mad to-day and sane to-morrow. (341)

The rhetorical strategies of the passage include not only Robert and Lady Audley in the possibilities of madness but the reader as well. The narrator points out that the eminently sane and masculine Dr Johnson was also prone to bouts of melancholy, and poses the questions "Who has not been, or is not to be, mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?" (341). To answer these questions is to implicate the reader in a madness which encompasses both Robert and Lady Audley, both men and women. For social stability to be reinforced, the potential disruption of "the trembling balance" felt by all must be deflected by the reassertion of gender differences. Lady Audley's madness sees her incarcerated; Robert's madness is repressed, made secret as he is reinstated in the social order. While Robert is still "haunted" he cannot declare his love for Clara. After Luke's confession, with the knowledge that George still lives, Robert can propose, but only on terms which include George: either Robert goes to Australia to fetch Clara's brother for her, or "Shall we both go, dearest?

Shall we go as man and wife? Shall we go together, my dear love, and bring our brother back between us?" (372).

Clara is not the only woman instrumental in Robert's fulfilling his masculine potential. As I have already stated, Robert's wish to solve the mystery of George's disappearance becomes the pursuit of discovering Lady Audley's secret. But, in the end, as in Poe's "Purloined Letter", what the secret hides is of less importance for Robert than the function it plays in his life. In his role as detective he loses the inertia of his former life. He takes his place in the realm of Law by regarding the solving of the mystery as his first legal case. His life becomes "orderly", as he studies railway timetables, shipping lists, and notes each clue in a systematic fashion, to be filed away as his "JOURNAL OF FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GEORGE TALBOYS, INCLUSIVE OF FACTS WHICH HAVE NO APPARENT RELATION TO THAT CIRCUMSTANCE", the bold capitals pleasing him with their "official appearance", making him conclude "I begin to think that I ought to have pursued my profession, instead of dawdling my life away as I have done" (86). He takes his place in the realm of the Word when he begins to see the hand of God in his drive to discover the truth:

The one purpose which had slowly grown up in his careless nature until it had become powerful enough to work a change in that very nature, made him what he had never been before - a Christian; conscious of his own weakness; anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been force upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go. (133)

He confronts Lady Audley "with a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature - a pitiless embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution" (232). Being the only one to hear Lady Audley's

confession, he becomes the repository of her secret and gains the power and authority of religion, medicine and law. Robert acknowledges his role when he claims that "physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century" (316), and as such he is, as Foucault maintains "not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; [but] the master of truth".²⁷ Thus he is able to rid his uncle and society of Lady Audley's castrating influence. The significance of her secret could therefore be that it makes a man of him, and enables him to repress his own. Once he has her incarcerated in the Belgian madhouse, and he has proposed to Clara, he returns to London

a new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes; with a life that was so entirely changed that he looked out upon a world in which everything wore a radiant and rosy aspect, and wondered how it could ever have seemed such a dull, neutral-tinted universe. (372)

Robert is, at the end of the novel, a practising lawyer and a family man, secure in the patriarchal order of the public and private spheres.

Nevertheless, the ending cannot be dismissed with such a finality. Robert's attitude to women, Clara included, is ambivalent, not to say antagonistic, and he alone is responsible for Lady Audley's downfall and destruction. The question of Robert's madness destabilizes his grasp on the patriarchal order and unsettles that order itself. His articulated fear of women and his unarticulated love of George at once undermine and uphold the "truth" of his masculine construct of Lady Audley as his feminine "other".

²⁷ Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol.1 67.

Will the real Lady Audley please stand up?

"Is Lady Audley's secret that she carries hereditary insanity? Or is the secret that "insanity" is simply the label society attaches to female assertion, ambition, self-interest, and outrage?" So asks Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*.²⁸ Of interest here are the terms "assertion", "ambition", "self-interest". Used of a woman these would immediately consign her to the realm of the unnatural, the unfeminine, even the masculine. To contemporary reviewers, Lady Audley's actions could be problematical on more than moral grounds. As E. S. Dallas wrote in 1866:

But when women are the chief characters, how can you set them in motion? The life of women cannot well be described as a life of action. When women are thus put forward to lead the action of a plot, they must be urged into a false position. To get vigorous action they are described as rushing into crime, and doing masculine deeds.²⁹

Yet ambition and self-interest are the desires which appear to motivate Lady Audley, the epitome of femininity, rather than that which might be expected from the male constructs of her within the novel - her sexuality. Taylor argues that her "'insanity' is both the revelation of a truth and an extension of her ability to continually transform herself".³⁰ Nevertheless, this process of transformation is always made in the mirror of the masculine constructs of femininity. Her confession, when "my lady tells the truth" (chapter heading, chapter xxxv, 290), reveals her motivation to be in fear, rather than in desire - fear of abandonment, poverty, and madness. And even this confession needs the masculine authority of the modern day confessor, Robert, to authenticate her

²⁸ Showalter, *The Female Malady* 72.

²⁹ E.S.Dallas, *The Gay Science*, Vol. 2, (1866; New York and London: Garland, 1986) 297.

³⁰ Taylor 11.

subjectivity, a subjectivity that is then obliterated. She is allowed to speak, only to be "buried alive", already "unnamed" by Sir Michael, who will not allow her name to be spoken to him again, and renamed Mrs Taylor by Robert, who states "I do not think you would wish to be known by your real name" (330). But what is that name? In the end, as "the invalid lady", she is entirely anonymous, invalidated, locked in a room of mirrors which ironically echoes her chamber at Audley Court:

This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, on the window-panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those glimmering surfaces which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries made of burnished tin. (329)

This remains her final interior, that which has no depth but is all reflection of exteriors, all surface.

If, in nineteenth-century patriarchal bourgeois ideology, the female body was so marginalized, through the myth of asexuality, to be denied, or marginalized to be contained, by becoming a container, a vessel and vehicle of generation rather than a site of desire and pleasure, it returned as the repressed, demonized and powerful, as Nina Auerbach has shown. Its symbolic danger was ever present as the reverse of the angel, not as dichotomous extremes, but inseparable, each always already implicated in the other. Lady Audley signifies the impossibility of woman, as outside an ideological framework which operates within and through a language where the symbolic is dominated by patriarchal constructs.

We are returned yet again to the question, *What is Lady Audley's secret?* In the search for this apparently hidden truth, commentators, critics and the text

itself provide a multiplicity of answers. But as Poe's detective, Dupin states, remarkably aptly if applied in the new context of *Lady Audley's Secret*,

There is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the most important knowledge, I do believe she is invariably superficial.³¹

Could it be, therefore, that Lady Audley's secret is that she is all surface? That she is a "fictitious" construct, solely a product and object of male desire? Although she could not be described as "representative" in the way Showalter would maintain, as a model of the hidden and dangerous power of women, since that in itself can be seen as a construction of patriarchy, a displacement of both male fear and desire, she can be seen as representative of the very process of production of that construct, the dichotomous role of angel and demon. It is therefore in the revelation that there are no depths (with the resulting criticism that sensation novels are all plot and no characterization) that the secret and the subversiveness of the novel could be said to lie.

Therefore although one would like to agree with Elaine Showalter that Lady Audley's secret is that she is sane (and the text works both to affirm and to deny that claim), the secret disclosed by the text is that Lady Audley does not "exist", that she is a fictitious construct, her very materiality produced by the men who grant her ideological life and space. The irony of their realist readings of her is that they believe what they want to see; she is produced before their very eyes, as it were, as Lucy Graham, or Helen Maldon, or Lady Audley and so on. The need in her life for mirrors to give her existence is evidence of that fact. Even when

³¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol 2, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: the Belknap Press of the Harvard UP, 1978) 545. The peculiar aptness of the aphorism "Truth is found in a well" did not go unnoticed at the time of the novel's popularity, as a verse in the "sensational song" "How to Make a Novel" indicates: "Down into a well, / Lady, thrust your lover / Truth, as some folks tell, / There he may discover." "How to Make a Novel" 636.

her rooms are empty and locked, men can gain access and perceive her representation in her portrait, itself ambiguous and open to reading, another male production of her. Where in the text is the "real" Lady Audley? Is she incorporeal? She and the other blond women in the novel are a series of signifiers which reach out through Robert's lists of dangerous women to embody the "impossible thought". There is no centred character, Lady Audley. She is repeatedly destabilized both through the variation of her name - Helen Maldon, Lucy Graham, Lucy Audley, Mrs Taylor, and, eventually, namelessness - and through her association with other similar women, either the similarity of appearance (Phoebe, Matilda Plowson), or of action (Catherine de' Medici, Lucretia Borgia, for example).

According to Barbara Johnson, a signifier is "known only in its effects. The signifier is an articulation in a chain, not an identifiable unit. It cannot be known in itself because it is capable of 'sustaining itself *only* in a displacement'. It is localized, but only as the nonrecognizable locus of a differential relationship".³² Is it therefore more important that we know Lady Audley has a secret rather than what it is? The secret, as signifier, is what brings about the "making" of Robert Audley, his turn from feminine inaction to masculine action, his taking his place in the patriarchal symbolic order of law and Christianity, as well as in the familial order of husband and fatherhood. By becoming the repository of Lady Audley's secret, which after all is no secret - that she murdered her husband is proven false, that she is mad is debatable - he regains/acquires power: to incarcerate her, reduce her to a nameless nothing, no longer a threat, and to re-establish the "proper" order, the order of propriety and property, Alicia matched to Sir Harry Towers, himself to Clara, living in idyllic

³² Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida", *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 242.

bliss in a cottage on the banks of the Thames. At the end of the novel it would appear that a closure is achieved.

However, the textual instability of the novel, the unsettling question of "mad today, sane tomorrow" has already worked to destabilize the textual body. The lack of closure about my lady's secret also unsettles the reader who desires a fixity, that which Francis Barker terms an "essential subjectivity fully realized", or a seemingly transparent text which reveals all the mysteries, provides a "reality" which is containable and contained.³³ On another level, Lady Audley's lack of essentiality is a threat to bourgeois consciousness. As I have shown, her secret can be seen both to hide and reveal a lack, a sign of the decentred self, of non-interiority: we do not "see inside her" except in the "literal metaphor" of the locked boudoir (or madhouse prison chamber). This can be interpreted as the internal privacy of all individuals, if we read it in terms of the Cartesian presence. The men's invasion of her room is an invasion of her internal privacy, a rape both mental and physical, a sign of their patriarchal power (and yet this does not seem to outrage anyone but appears as a just reward for the unnatural woman). Even so, the very emptiness of her rooms heralds the signification of absence, a lack of plenitude, and the unsettling of the fully conscious "self": yet again she is only one of an endless number of signifiers. And her room is also, in the end, her prison.

In constructing texts which seemingly dwelt on and prioritized plot, the sensation writers incurred the animosity of the reviewers of the time. Yet the realist myth of character, with psychological motivation and the plausibility of cause and effect, is predicated upon the idea of a fully present consciousness, of "depth", such as "depth of character". By constructing a discourse of surface, in

³³ Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984) 38.

fact highlighting surface by the implications that the truth, or the depth, is veiled in mysteries, and yet at the same time apparently revealing all by the end, uncovering the secret, the sensation writer exposed this myth of depth to be the hollow decentred destabilized absence that it is, that "character" is illusion, that "realism" masks its own production. That woman is an impossible reality if not the pathologized production of patriarchal bourgeois ideology is the textual implication of *Lady Audley's Secret*. In *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon hints at an alternative discourse.

Who is Lucy Floyd? - hearing in the masculine

In both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, Braddon investigates certain constructions of femininity, the apparent oppositions of angel and demon. In *Lady Audley's Secret* the two are figured in the one character, Lucy Audley. In *Aurora Floyd* there are two women who appear to embody the two extremes, passionate Aurora and her passionless cousin Lucy. In this novel, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, the text unsettles the seemingly fixed oppositions of surface and depth, secrecy and knowledge, and what is natural and unnatural in women. Preceding Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" by two years, *Aurora Floyd* challenges (and perhaps prompts) its construction of domestic order and harmony. It exposes the division of the separate spheres and the education of women as helpmeet as a dangerous construct for women. Even though domestic order is restored at the end of the novel and there appear to be no more secrets, for all truths are revealed, the matter is not so simple. Harmony is achieved not at the cost of incarceration and death, as in *Lady Audley's Secret*, but by another kind of violence: in the reshaping of the temptress Aurora into a madonna figure and in the mute and mutilated figure of her angelic cousin Lucy.

In raising questions of what is natural and unnatural in woman, the text exposes the way in which the oppositional construction of femininity is just that - a construction. According to different perspectives within the text, Aurora is both natural and unnatural, open and readable, and yet transgressive. Talbot Bulstrode sees Aurora in terms of an eastern drug, or an alcoholic drink, something to intoxicate, something that is exotic and forbidden.³⁴ He feels "she is like everything that is beautiful and strange, and wicked and *unwomanly*, and bewitching; and she is just the sort of creature that many a fool would fall in love with" (40, emphasis added). As Robert does of Lady Audley, Bulstrode compares Aurora with notorious women in history known for their passion: Cleopatra, Nell Gwynn, Lola Montez, Charlotte Corday, all dangerous, excessive, outside of social bounds and conventionalities. But in this reading of Aurora it is a masculine perception of Aurora as the dangerous temptress, from the point of view of the man who is tempted, rather than the woman who may not be aware that she is tempting. The women Bulstrode is reminded of present also a male perception of women's history, or rather he draws upon those women who appear in the histories of men, by transgressing the boundaries of the private sphere and entering the public arena and yet who are still defined by their relationships to men.

The narrative voice on the other hand, when speaking of Aurora, uses imagery of nature. In this reading, she is constructed as natural rather than unnatural. She "was like some beautiful, noisy, boisterous waterfall; for ever dancing, rushing, sparkling, scintillating, and utterly defying you to do anything but admire it" (63). After her illness, "her own nature revived in unison with the bright revival of the genial summer weather. As the trees in the garden put forth new strength and beauty, so the glorious vitality of her constitution

³⁴ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1863; London: Virago, 1984) 29, 40, 62. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text.

returned with much of its wonted power" (98). In an image which echoes Sarah Ellis, and prefigures John Stuart Mill's metaphor of the artificiality of woman, Aurora is compared with a plant which grows wild and untrammelled:³⁵

We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and pruned by the gardener's merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature. (17)

The implications of this passage are twofold. Firstly, the text presupposes an essential nature of woman which exists, prior to discourse, to be modified in some way by her entry into that discourse, be it society, education and so on. But secondly, that nature is problematized by the very discourses with which it must engage. Can a woman be true to her "nature" if that nature is always modified in some way? On the one hand Aurora "said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; learned what she pleased; and she grew into a bright impetuous being, affectionate and generous-hearted as her mother, but with some touch of native fire blended in her mould that stamped her as original". On the other hand "the end of all this was, that, in the common acceptance of the term, Aurora was spoiled" (17). Thus, paradoxically, in both these claims, she is at once true and untrue to nature. What is natural is shown to be a matter of perspective rather than a given truth. What makes it a "truth" is "the common acceptance of the term", that is the hegemonic discourse of the middle-class construction of womanhood. Within this discourse of social acceptability Aurora is "an original" rather than a type like her cousin Lucy.

³⁵ Sarah Ellis, in *Mothers of England*, writes, for example, "If ever then the care of a judicious mother is wanted, it is in the open feelings of a young girl, when branches of the tenderest growth have to be cherished and directed, rather than checked and lopped off". She is warning against the "extinction of [a girl's] individuality", 342-3. John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" (1869), *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill: Essays on Sex Equality*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (Chicago and London: the U of Chicago P, 1970) 148.

Lucy, in one reading, can be dismissed as the conventional well-behaved nonentity that she appears to be, the conforming heroine of the religious novels she so favours:

... she was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. ... She was lady-like, accomplished, well-informed; and if there were a great many others of precisely the same type of graceful womanhood, it was certainly the highest type, and the holiest, and the best. (41)

Captain Bulstrode "found that she talked exactly as he had heard other young ladies talk; that she knew all they knew, and had been to the places they had visited. The ground they went over was very old indeed, but Lucy traversed it with charming propriety" (36). The Lucys of the world, then, would seem to be infinitely replaceable, their names an endless string of signifiers for one signified: or so it might seem to the "straight penetrating gaze" (33) of Bulstrode in his construction of women on purely conventional grounds. "There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras" (41). Aurora does not fit his model, whereas Lucy "was his ideal" (35):

Talbot Bulstrode's ideal woman was some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid shrinking being, as pale and prim as the mediaeval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home. (34)

Bulstrode's model of womanhood is that of a passionless object, for he does not even think of her in terms of subjectivity. She is a "creature" and a "being". "He wanted some spontaneous exhibition of innocent feeling which might justify him in saying, 'I am beloved!' He felt little capacity for loving, on his own side; but he thought that he would be grateful to any woman who would regard him with disinterested affection, and that he would devote his life to making her

happy" (34). Thus the relationship must be passionless on both sides - he the object of her affection, she the object of his gratitude.

It might be argued that Bulstrode's construction of womanhood should not be taken as representative. After all, he falls in love with Aurora, despite his ideals, and marries Lucy only as second best once Aurora appears to lose her innocence and will not divulge her secret. However, in the other representative male in the novel, John Mellish, bluff and open beside Bulstrode's standoffish pride, we find a similar constraining view of womanhood. Mellish accepts Aurora without requiring to know her secret, thus appearing to allow her independent subjectivity. However, their marriage is described in Ruskinian rhetoric, the bliss of domesticity undermined by the images of constraint in which it is couched:

She was happy in the calm security of her home, happy in that pleasant *stronghold* in which she was *so fenced about and guarded* by love and devotion. I do not know that she ever felt any romantic or enthusiastic love for this big Yorkshireman; but I do know that from the first hour in which she laid her head upon his broad breast she was true to him - true as a wife should be; true in every thought; true in the merest shadow of a thought. A wide gulf yawned around the altar of her home, separating her from every other man in the universe, and leaving her alone with that one man whom she had accepted as her husband. She had accepted him in the truest and purest sense of the word. She had accepted him from the hand of God, as the *protector and shelterer* of her life; and morning and night upon her knees, she thanked the gracious Creator who had made this man for her help-meet. (119-120, emphases added)

Aurora is therefore incarcerated as effectively as Lady Audley. Her state only appears to be one of freedom. She is, in fact, domesticated, tamed. The previous imagery of the wild growing plant is extended into a metaphor of violent implications, as the womanly body is mutilated to train it into the maternal

ideal. Aurora's love for Mellish is not the romantic passion she held for Bulstrode, but both are shown as deflecting woman's nature:

She loved you [the narrator addresses Bulstrode] with the girl's romantic fancy and reverent admiration; and tried humbly to fashion her very nature anew, that she might be worthy of your sublime excellence. She loved you as women only love in their first youth, and as they rarely love the men they ultimately marry. The tree is perhaps all the stronger when these first frail branches are lopped away to give place to strong and spreading arms, beneath which a husband and children may shelter. (109-110)

The irony in this pronouncement is, of course, that Aurora presumably loved another man before Talbot Bulstrode, since her secret is that, at eighteen, she ran away with and married her groom, James Conyers. The implication is that if she did not love Conyers, his attraction lay merely in his "very perfection of physical beauty ... rather a sensual type of beauty" (151). Aurora's secret then is based upon her sexuality and a desire that is neither romantic nor maternal, outside of the patriarchally acceptable constructs of Victorian girlhood and womanly desire.

The metaphor of pruning "natural" desire is again employed when a "governess, companion, and chaperon" is engaged for Aurora because she was, according to her aunt,

sadly in need of some accomplished and watchful person, whose care it would be to train and prune those exuberant branches of her nature which had been suffered to grow as they would from her infancy. The beautiful shrub was no longer to trail its wild stems along the ground, or shoot upward to the blue skies at its own sweet will; it was to be trimmed, and clipped and fastened primly to the stone wall of society with cruel nails and galling strips of cloth. (42)

It would appear that the element of sacrifice does not come "naturally" as writers like Greg would have it, but is forced upon women as an act of violence and domestic imprisonment by a society which includes women like Mrs Alexander

Floyd, one of Ellis's "judicious" mothers, and Mrs Powell, "that grim, pale-faced watch-dog" (44), to carry out its surveillance. The two metaphorical strands permeate a text which seemingly endorses the domestic ideal. Even Lucy, the epitome of perfect girlhood, is constructed in these terms. Her suitability as a wife does not come naturally. "She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle". She had been "mercilessly well educated" (22), but the process is to keep her a child in a state of infantilized purity: "She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds. She was as ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of the world" (41).

Nevertheless, the text undermines this seeming state of innocence. Lucy is far more aware than she appears to be. It is Lucy who realizes Talbot Bulstrode's love for Aurora before he does, just as John Mellish perceives Lucy's secret love for Bulstrode. "It comforted him to watch Lucy, and to read in those faint signs and tokens, which had escaped even a mother's eye, the sad history of her unrequited affection" (79). Braddon engages with discourses such as Ellis's to expose the repressive nature of their arguments. Ellis, too, recognized the secret desires of a young woman and the need for such desires to be controlled. Braddon's Lucy figures in Ellis's text as one of "those characters which appear in general society the most hidden, and the most reserved, [who] are struggling hard with under-currents of tumultuous feelings, of which the world has little knowledge or suspicion" (*Mothers*, 340). Mrs Alexander has failed therefore as an Ellis mother for "with this second life, so often hid in the bosom of her child, the mother ought to live" (*Mothers*, 340). Braddon indicates that despite the vigilance of the watch-dogs of society, even women like Lucy appear to escape, but at a cost - their silence. Passionlessness, the text implies, does not come naturally to the Lucys of the world, but as an act of repression:

Mrs Alexander's daughter had been far too well educated to betray one emotion of her heart, and she bore her girlish agonies, and concealed her hourly tortures, with the quiet patience common to these simple womanly martyrs. (47)

Bulstrode's perception of her as the perfect wife, because of her lack of passion, is merely a reflection of his own lack. She gains her heart's desire by never showing that desire. What she feels is "a tumult of wild delight", and "joyful fear and trembling". She "loved him so well, and had loved him so long". But what she shows are blushes and trembling, for "she was the most undemonstrative of women". Her voice is reduced to "a low-consenting murmur which meant Yes" (134). The long discursive intrusion by the narrator which follows Bulstrode's proposal is the most overt statement in the text of the way in which the desires of women like Lucy are constrained:

How hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! The dark-eyed, impetuous creatures, who speak out fearlessly, and tell you that they love or hate you - flinging their arms round your neck or throwing the carving-knife at you, as the case may be - get full value for their emotion; but these gentle creatures love, and make no sign. They sit, like patience on a monument, smiling at grief; and no one reads the mournful meaning of that sad smile. ... They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. The only outward sign Lucy Floyd gave of the condition of her heart was that one tremulous, half-whispered affirmative; and yet what a tempest of emotion was going forward within! The muslin folds of her dress rose and fell with the surging billows; but, for the very life of her, she could have uttered no better response to Talbot's pleading. (135)

Talbot's response to Lucy is to diminish her. He refers to her frequently as "poor little Lucy": "my poor little Lucy loves me after her fashion; loves me in fear and trembling, as if she and I belonged to different orders of being" (140). The misperception is ironic, since the text makes clear that they in fact are different, and that he will never understand the import of his words. He

exemplifies "hearing in the masculine", a phrase adapted from Hélène Cixous. For Cixous, even when a woman speaks her truth, she is unlikely to be heard: "...her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine".³⁶ Lucy has not even the chance to speak. To exist she must function within the hegemonic male discourse, as an espaliered woman "fastened primly to the stone wall of society" (42).

Yet the text, through its metaphoric structures as well as through the intrusive narrative voice, can be said to be speaking for her. We will never know her story in the way we are told her cousin's, but nevertheless, the fact that she has another, interior, life, another possibility of sexuality and desire, outside of "normal" discourse, is made clear by the text. One area where the alternative readings are juxtaposed is that of women's illness. The text plays upon the oppositions of the practical everyday "commonsense" approach of medical science and the romantic conventions of love sickness to present a masculine and a feminine reading of Lucy's condition. Denied voice, the body reveals something of such women's interiorized secrets:

concealment, like the worm i' the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; and compassionate relatives tell them that they are bilious, and recommend some homely remedy for their pallid complexions. (135)

When Lucy's health declines after Aurora and Bulstrode become engaged, it is ascribed to the adverse climate which had been "too much for the young lady's strength" (63). Furthermore

Talbot and Aurora were both concerned to see the pale cheeks of their gentle companion; but everybody was ready to ascribe them to a cold, or a cough, or constitutional debility, or some other bodily

³⁶ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Marks and Courtivron 251.

evil, which could be cured by drugs and boluses; and no one for a moment imagined that anything could possibly be amiss with a young lady who lived in a luxurious house, went shopping in a carriage and pair, and had more pocket-money than she cared to spend. But the Lily Maid of Astalot lived in a lordly castle, and had doubtless ample pocket-money to buy gorgeous silks for her embroidery, and had little on earth to wish for, and nothing to do; whereby she fell sick for love of Sir Lancelot, and pined and died. (65)

The body is thus textualized, drawn into medical or literary discourses, but both, the text implies, are open to alternative readings. Yet whatever way Lucy's textualized body might be read, the ending is either silence or death: "when people told her of her pale face, and the family doctor wondered at the failure of his quinine mixture, perhaps she nourished a vague hope that before the spring-time came back again, bringing with it the wedding-day of Talbot and Aurora, she would have escaped from all this demonstrative love and happiness, and be at rest" (66).

The novel constantly returns to the language of violation or constraint. On the one hand Aurora seems to be the woman with the secret, an unacceptable transgressive sexuality. She is said to be "dwarfed and crippled" by this secret, and in the end, once that secret is dealt with, returns to her "true nature" which is "frank and open as the day" (312). Secrecy, therefore, is shown as alien to her nature, another example of the paradox of what is natural and unnatural in the novel. The "unnatural" woman, passionate and secretive, is discovered to be a male construct. Her desire is disturbingly transformed into another more "natural" form by the end of the novel, while the third possibility, a sexuality outside the bounds of masculine discourse, disappears for her altogether:

So we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born. (384)

On the other hand, the apparently transparent, good woman, Lucy, is shown to be a woman in possession of a secret life, her "natural" desires and her sexuality silenced in a patriarchal society which will not allow her to exist, to find the voice of true subjectivity. Aurora, apparently rebellious, is, in fact, the conformist, complying with two different masculine constructions of womanhood, the temptress and the mother. Lucy, apparently infinitely replaceable, possesses a secret life which finds no voice in the hegemonic discourse. For Cixous, "woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds ...".³⁷ The last we hear of Lucy, apart from a mention of her "blue-eyed girl-baby" (384), are Bulstrode's words, comparing her life with that of her cousin:

"Thank Heaven, my poor little Lucy has never been forced into playing the heroine of a tragedy like this; thank Heaven, my poor little darling's life flows evenly and placidly in a smooth channel!"
(373)

Lucy's tragedy is that she will always be silenced, locked within another's story, and unheard even by the object of her desire.

³⁷ Cixous, "Medusa" 257.

Chapter 12

Charlotte Yonge and The Domestication of Heaven: the Almighty as *Pater Familias*.

"I mean that while woman works merely for the sake of self-cultivation, the clever grow conceited and emulous, the practical harsh and rigid, the light or dull vain, frivolous, deceitful, by way of escape, and it all gets absurd. But the being handmaids of the Church brings all right; and the school of St. Sophia develops even the intellect."

Geraldine Underwood, in *The Pillars of the House*.¹

"I remembered your [name] because of a family in a novel that I used to admire very much in my girlish days - "

"Oh! I know," cried Janey [May], "the Daisy Chain. We are not a set of prigs like those people. We are not goody, whatever we are." Margaret Oliphant, *Phoebe, Junior*.²

"I did think I should not have been a commonplace woman," and she shed a few tears.

Rachel Curtis, the "Clever Woman of the Family".³

If Mary Braddon and the sensation novelists were categorized in terms of illness, then the writing of Charlotte Yonge must surely have represented ideological good health. Although "popular" and "feminine", her novels nevertheless seemed to reiterate and reinforce a construction of femininity which, like that of Sarah Ellis, was non-threatening to patriarchal order and safely confined within the doctrine of the separate spheres. Yonge's were the kind of novel that Braddon's well-brought-up young woman, Lucy Floyd, chose to read in her solitary hours:

¹ Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Pillars of the House, or, Under Wode, Under Rode*, Vol. II (1873; London: MacMillan, 1889) 363. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the title *Pillars*.

² Margaret Oliphant, *Phoebe, Junior* (1876; London: Virago, 1989) 141.

³ Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865; London: Virago, 1985) 283. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the title *Clever Woman*.

Miss Lucy Floyd explained that she had been in the wood with the last new novel, - a High-Church novel, in which the heroine rejected the clerical hero because he did not perform the service according to the Rubric. (*Aurora Floyd*, 135)

Braddon might satirize, and even Oliphant might poke gentle fun at, Braddon's high moral stance, but the very presence of her novels, intertextually, within the others' texts, indicates that hers was an influential position that had to be encountered and engaged with.⁴ At one extreme Braddon's *Lady Audley* and *Aurora Floyd* embodied the hollowness of the ideology of femininity. Yonge, on the other hand, produced heroines who appeared to solidify the "truths" of that ideology. Yet while Braddon's heroines were condemned for the "fleshly" record of their "sensual passions", Yonge's heroines seem to have no "body", their physical of lesser importance than their spiritual materiality.⁵ However the question of femininity is not untroubled in Yonge's fiction. Although sited securely within the realm of the domestic sphere and within familial relations, Yonge's construction of femininity negotiates oppositions of strength and weakness, activity and passivity, selfishness and selflessness, similar to those found in other women writers of her day. Thus, once again, texts which otherwise seem solid in their certainties, are destabilized by apparent oppositions of gender.

In the construction of sexuality and the formation of gender, the family in the nineteenth century occupied the role of both producer and that which was produced. It was the primary site of regulation and surveillance of the kind of sexuality regarded as "normal", but this norm of a heterosexual monogamous sexuality was itself productive of a domestic ideal, which was in turn, gendered. The bourgeois family, although upholding patriarchal law, both secular and

⁴ See the epigraph from *Phoebe Junior*, the novel in which Margaret Oliphant re-writes Yonge's May family as a more down-to-earth, less spiritually motivated group of siblings.

⁵ Oliphant, "Novels" 259.

religious, and presided over by the authority of the father, occupied a domestic space which was constituted, in opposition to the masculine public sphere, as feminine. This family was, according to Foucault, "a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities", "a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships".⁶ But, at the same time, the family neither set boundaries for, nor did it exclude, sexuality, "but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals".⁷ One's identity, particularly for women, had become inextricably bound up both with one's sexuality and with one's place in familial relationships, a regulation of "self" which was confined, for women, to the domestic sphere and the role of daughter, sister, wife, and, especially, mother, a regulation which Foucault describes as "the one type of sexuality that was capable of reproducing labor power and the form of the family".⁸

It might seem almost perverse to introduce the domestic novels of Charlotte Yonge within a discussion of sexuality, since their popular acceptability came from the very absence of anything that could appear as transgressive sexuality, and their domestic tranquillity is ruffled by problems which are pallid set beside the other strands of popular fiction, such as the sensation novel. Nevertheless, the domestic fiction of Charlotte Yonge was productive of a normative sexuality even though "sex" appears entirely absent from its pages. As Nancy Armstrong has argued, fiction can be regarded "both as a document and as an agency of cultural history". Consequently, she continues, "it helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, ... it made that space totally functional and used it as the context for representing normal behavior".⁹

⁶ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 46.

⁷ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 47.

⁸ Foucault, *Sexuality*, Vol. 1 47.

⁹ Armstrong, "Politics" 79.

Yonge's novels gave centrality and therefore importance to the usually marginalized domestic sphere, the realm of femininity. And although much of her construct of this femininity was restrictive and ultimately subjected to the law of the father/Father, in her novels it was feminine behaviour, in the form of self-sacrifice, suffering, and sensitivity, which assumed predominance and the status of "truth".

In upholding the doctrine of the separate spheres and woman's essentially domestic role, Yonge resembles writers such as Sarah Ellis. Ellis's construction of the universe, as I have represented it, was a series of circles ever radiating out from the domestic hearth at the centre of which stood a woman. Yonge's model, on the other hand, turned inwards, drawing even Heaven within the circle of the domestic hearth. Everything in her world was judged by how it affected the family, both the mundane and the Heavenly. The centre of her orbit was the Pater Familias, the Heavenly Father, and his often weak and flawed representative on earth, the man at the head of the household. Women might learn to emulate men's good, but not to supersede their authority and knowledge. In Yonge's world, men had the ultimate and rightful control over the production of truth. Yet this is not to say that femininity was despised. It was necessary but lesser, in terms of Yonge's orthodoxy and adherence to her doctrinal beliefs, but at the same time, the "feminine" virtues were most important, if their weighting in the text is taken into account. It is this tension, between the strengths and weaknesses of womanhood, between a positive and negative femininity, and between an active usefulness and passive uselessness, which infuses her texts, and upsets rigidly dichotomous constructions of gender.

The same tension might be said to infuse Yonge's role as an author. Although she referred all her early work to her father and John Keble, her mentor, to be vetted for "coarseness" and although she accepted the changes they

made, as a successful author she was in a position of "authority" and her words were deemed important.¹⁰ As Ellis disarmed opposition by pointing out that she wrote for women, so Yonge attempted to maintain a subordinate and therefore feminine role by writing didactic fiction for girls and educational text books. She described woman's role as a writer as useful though transitory, translating the truths of men for "lesser" minds:

Woman can often speak with great effect to her own generation, even if her achievements do not obtain lasting fame, and this should be her aim ... where she can deal with more solid subjects, her pen can be most valuable. Essays like Anne Mozley's, histories, memoirs, science teachings made comprehensible to the popular or the childish mind, all these are subjects in which women can worthily excel. A good school book is a very profitable article till it is superseded, as it is sure to be in these days of progress.¹¹

Within Yonge's own writing the questions of usefulness and true femininity arise again and again. The falsely feminine - shallowness, vanity, over-refinement - was condemned as much as impropriety and transgressive behaviour. Like Ellis, Yonge distinguished between "womanhood" and "ladyhood". Rachel, in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, disparages the state of "young ladyhood" as "frivolous", and comments that the vivacious Bessie Keith's "sunbeam" nature "is almost enough to make one believe there can be some soul in young lady life" (*Clever Woman*, 181). In *The Trial*, Averil Ward has been educated at what Dr May calls "that grand school, where she cost more

¹⁰ See Margaret Mare and Alicia C. Percival, *Victorian Best-seller: The World of Charlotte M. Yonge* (1947; Port Washington, New York and London: Kennikat Press, 1970) 133, and Showalter, *Literature* 26, 57. Ruskin wrote of Yonge's work editing *The Monthly Packet*, the Church of England paper for young women, "Your editress is a very powerful and deadly form of charming bigot", Introductory blurb to Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*. The readers of her paper valued her words so highly they formed a society over which she presided, as "oracle" from 1859 to 1874, Mare and Percival 200.

¹¹ Charlotte M. Yonge, "Authorship", *The Monthly Packet* (September, 1892), reprinted in *A Chaplet for Charlotte Yonge*, ed. Georgina Battiscombe and Marghanita Laski for the Charlotte Yonge Society (London: The Cresset Press, 1965) 189.

than the whole half-dozen of [his daughters] put together".¹² Mary May reacts to Averil's stylish uselessness in a family crisis with a dream of which the moral is "use before gentility" (*Trial*, 28). The most active agent in distinguishing Yonge's characters as truly feminine, or bringing them to a sense of their own right actions or redemption, is illness. Illness provides the figure of the invalid, around whom certain spiritual values can cluster. Illness strikes those women who dare to question, or act independently, or rival men. Illness directly or indirectly softens the characters of the women who are too "masculine", and brings them into a maternal role. Illness also feminizes men, or domesticates masculinity. In contrast there is, in each of her novels, a woman who, although at times she might be physically ill, represents the true "health" of useful, domestic womanhood.

Physical invalidity/spiritual validity

Illness in the novels of Charlotte Yonge does not go unnoticed. Her biographers comment "illness, as well as death, played a vastly important part in the lives of Victorian families, and is described by Miss Yonge as accompanied by a quite incredible series of symptoms".¹³ In the laudatory collection of papers, *A Chaplet for Charlotte Yonge*, one is devoted to a medical analysis of the illnesses that occur in her works.¹⁴ However, although it is remarked upon, little notice is taken of the function of illness within the novels. The most noticeable type of ill character is the invalid, of whom Mare and Percival write:

¹² Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Trial: More Links in the Daisy Chain* (1865; London: MacMillan, 1884) 15. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the title *Trial*.

¹³ Mare and Percival 262.

¹⁴ Annis Gillie, "Serious and Fatal Illness in the Contemporary Novels", Battiscombe and Laski 98-105.

invalidism might quite be considered as one of the professions. It was open to both sexes, but as a rule the candidate was feminine. It is remarkable how often, and how cheerfully, a female member of the family may be said to enjoy ill-health all her life. She lies on a sofa, and this couch becomes a centre of family life.¹⁵

In *The Daisy Chain*, Margaret May becomes an invalid after the carriage accident which kills her mother and disables her father's right arm. She suffers spinal injuries, which, despite an initial favourable prognosis by a London specialist, means she never walks again. After the accident she is carried to her mother's room which becomes the focal point of family life, with Margaret as the spiritual and administrative centre of the household. This is not to say that she is a perfect or static character. The subtitle of the novel, "Aspirations", indicates that the characters will have to acknowledge their personal weaknesses, as outlined by their mother before her death, and evaluate the worthiness of their ambitions. Margaret's aspiration is to be first in importance, "the ruler and manager of everything", an ambition she of course achieves, but not in the way she imagined.¹⁶ In coming to terms with her illness, she has to learn submission and humility, her true place as a woman. The idealized figure of her mother, whose name she shares, had been happy when totally confined to the domestic sphere; in her "smooth pleasant plumpness", Mrs May maintained a "perfect content and serenity", "full of quiet grace and refinement", "her whole air and expression denoting a serene, unruffled, affectionate happiness, yet with much authority in her mildness - warm and open in her own family, but reserved beyond it, and shrinking from general society", for she "was not fond of strangers" (*Daisy Chain*, 10, 11). Margaret, in what was her mother's bed, literally takes her mother's place and her domestic confinement is complete. Her first Christmas in this state is "so spent in caring for brother, father, and children, that

¹⁵ Mare and Percival 263.

¹⁶ Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Daisy Chain or Aspirations: A Family Chronicle* (1856; London: Virago, 1988) 633. All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the title *Daisy Chain*.

she had hardly time to dwell on the sad change that had befallen herself" (*Daisy Chain*, 121), and she tells Ethel "I have been thinking how well off I am, able to enjoy so much, and be employed all day long" (*Daisy Chain*, 128). By becoming invalid for a "normal" life, of marriage to Alan Ernescliffe, and subsequent maternity, she achieves true femininity without a hint of physical sexuality, the pure Actonian bodiless woman, sister, daughter, wife and mother all in one.¹⁷

Yonge's invalid, therefore, is unlike Elizabeth Gaskell's, since Gaskell's Mrs Hilton and Mrs Hamley are both actual wives and mothers whose self-sacrifice is shown to be a dangerous ideal. For J. S. Bratton, Margaret May exemplifies one of Yonge's "most morally impressive mother-figures", those characters who "are confined to their sofas without ever experiencing childbirth, thereby reproducing the pattern of the Virgin Mary as closely as possible".¹⁸ Bratton would argue that the sofa represents the final expression of the passivity of the mother's role as "she is finally immobilised by her female function".¹⁹ But although Margaret is undeniably the source of moral influence in her family, she is not only that. To argue for "passivity" ignores what is crucial in Yonge's text, that the body and physicality is not the only, or even an important part of life. For her characters, even the moral exemplars, moral and spiritual activity are vital. What Margaret has to learn is to curb her own sense of importance, that spirit

which made her, in her weakness and helplessness, bear the whole burthen of family cares alone, and devote herself entirely to spare her father. He was, indeed, her first object, and she would have sacrificed anything to give him ease of mind; but perhaps she

¹⁷ In Dinah Mulock Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), a similar process is seen in the character of the blind girl, Muriel. Once she becomes an invalid after an accident, she becomes more and more disembodied and is spiritualized as an angel figure. Yet even though she is only eleven, she is given token womanhood by the love of Lord Ravenel, that is, the projected possibility of a future wifehood. Before her death, she handles a baby with instinctive maternal solicitude. Thus she goesthrough all the stages of the feminine ideal without having to live them. She is a daughter and sister, but also "wife" and "mother" without being sexualized at all.

¹⁸ J. S. Bratton, *The Impact of Victorian Children's Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1981) 186.

¹⁹ Bratton 187.

regarded him more as a charge of her own, than as, in very truth, the head of the family. (*Daisy Chain*, 159)

In any of her feminine roles she is not to carry "her consideration beyond what was strictly right", or to forget her father is "the real authority" (*Daisy Chain*, 160). Margaret's transgression is that she suffers from an excess of femininity, that she is too maternal.

In the course of the novel, however, Margaret is reduced more and more to a representation of true femininity, objectified as "the picture of goodness and sweetness" (*Daisy Chain*, 171). Despite the interlude of her courtship, and subsequent engagement to Alan, when she regains some bodily health, three years after the accident, "Margaret still lay on the sofa, and her complexion had assumed the dead white of habitual ill-health" (*Daisy Chain*, 337). As her health wanes, she physically fades: "though her mild serenity was not changed, she was almost transparently thin and pale" (*Daisy Chain*, 484). Increasingly she leaves the management of the household and practical worldly things to Ethel, who takes on the role of companion to her father as Margaret is destined for her Father. On the news of Alan's death, her incorporeality is stressed as she is transformed into almost pure spirit; she becomes like "an angel". Ethel sometimes entertains

a dim fancy that [Margaret's] composure came from a sense that she was too near Alan to mourn for him. Could it be true that her frame was more wasted, that there was less capability of exertion, that her hours became later in the morning, and that her nights were more wakeful? Would she fade away? (*Daisy Chain*, 503)

The only matter which catches Margaret's attention, as her interest in earthly matters diminishes, is the building of the church at Cocksmoor. The church, funded with Alan's money, is for her a point of identification with Alan, and in

many ways it replaces him as a sexual object. The "glow of colour" (*Daisy Chain*, 300) in her face on her engagement to Alan is now reproduced when she blushes "as she always did, with pleasure, when they talked of the Church" (*Daisy Chain*, 586), and her betrothal ring is set around the stem of the chalice used in it, a sign of "true union" (*Daisy Chain*, 607). In the end

that last gift of his, the Church, had afforded her continual delight, and, above all other earthly pursuits, smoothed away the languor and weariness of disease, as she slowly sank to join him. (*Daisy Chain*, 633)

The identification of Margaret, Alan and the Church is completed upon the coincidence of its consecration and her death. Although that death takes several agonizing pages, it begins with the "thrill" that "shot through Margaret's frame" when she hears "the bells - his bells!" on the breeze, and "the carnation tinted those thin white cheeks, eyes and smile beamed with joy" (*Daisy Chain*, 639), while she exclaims "Alan! Alan! ... It is enough! I am ready!" (*Daisy Chain*, 640). From that point "her ears were closed to earthly sounds" as "the frail earthly prison-house" is "broken down". The body as domestic icon at this point gives way to a vision of heaven as a more spiritualized domestic hearth. With her last words, Margaret departs her earthly family to gain her heavenly one: "Mamma! Alan! oh! there they are!" (*Daisy Chain*, 645); and her father is consoled by the "home-like, comfortable thought" that "her mother had one of her children with her" (*Daisy Chain*, 647).

Margaret's spiritual validity therefore increases parallel to her physical invalidity. Her physical sexuality, hinted at in the blushing responses to Alan's attention, is progressively transformed into a bodiless spirituality, the angel in the house without earthly desire. Yet what remains after her death, although the

memory is supposed to serve as a reminder of true femininity, reads more like thwarted desire:

Over now! The twenty-five years' life, the seven years' captivity on her couch, the anxious headship of the motherless household, the hopeless betrothal, the long suspense, the efforts for resignation, the widowed affections, the slow decay, the tardy painful death agony - all was over; nothing left, save what they had rendered the undying spirit, and the impress her example had left on those around her.
(*Daisy Chain*, 645)

The transformation is achieved both by etherealizing Margaret in this world and, at the same time, giving a materiality to the heavenly realm. Margaret leaves the body's "prison-house" to achieve her desire, by reproducing her familial role in heaven, as her mother's daughter and Alan's wife.²⁰

Another, more earthly, invalid appears in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, in the character of Ermine Williams. Her invalid state, like Margaret May's, is the result of an accident. As a young woman she was badly burnt in an explosion, when her sister, "in a fit of petulance" (*Clever Woman*, 41), threw down a match which ignited some chemicals left by their scientist brother. After a long illness she recovers her general health, but is confined to a wheel chair. In some ways Ermine's invalidism serves a function similar to Margaret's. Like Margaret, she provides an example to those around her. Her suffering increases her spiritual validity. Even in agony after the accident she found "words to cheer and soothe" (*Clever Woman*, 42) the young man she loved but could not marry. Alison, the guilt-ridden sister, claims that she "never did see any one so happy".

²⁰ At the end of *The Trial*, Averil Ward marries Tom May and replaces Margaret as family invalid: "Her sofa is almost a renewal of the family centre that once Margaret's was; the region where all tidings are brought fresh for discussion, all joys and sorrows poured out, the external influence that above all has tended to soften Gertrude into the bright grace of womanhood" (*Trial*, 439). However, her spiritual validity is not continued in later novels, such as *The Pillars of the House*, where she is rather a snob, not approving Gertrude's engagement to Lance Underwood, for example.

Ermine sees "the hopeful side of every sorrow", and provides empathetic counsel: "no burthen is a burthen when one has carried it to her" (*Clever Woman*, 43). Her advice contributes a moral focus for the other characters in the novel, in contrast to the wrong-mindedness of the "clever woman" Rachel.

Nevertheless, the major difference between Margaret and Ermine is that while Ermine's invalidism is real, her invalidity is a form of self-delusion. It is Rachel whose opinions prove to be invalid, while Ermine is the truly clever woman. As Alick, Rachel's husband, claims, in the final passage of the novel, Ermine proves that

intellect and brilliant power can be no snares, but only blessings helping the spirits in infirmity and usefulness, winning love and influence for good, genuine talents in the highest sense of the word. (*Clever Woman*, 367)

That Ermine hides behind her invalidism is shown by her use of the pseudonym "The Invalid" to sign her published articles, and by the way she disparages her condition by calling herself an "old cinder", "a wretched remnant", or "the impossible literary cripple" (*Clever Woman*, 44, 86, 89). She is everything Rachel wants to be, educated, intelligent, respected in the literary world, and publishing and editing to earn money. However, in contrast to Rachel's brash declarations of all her views, Ermine works secretly, out of the public eye. Her outer form is the invalid, weak, vulnerable, disguising her abilities. Her inability to move for herself does not betray her femininity, but confines and totally domesticates her.

Like Margaret, Ermine reigns within her sphere, but hers is a limited femininity. She sees herself as proscribed from those very things that would complete her, as "invalid", and she will not contemplate marriage, even when Colin Keith returns and wishes to marry her. Yet once she accepts that she need

not retire entirely from her feminine role, she becomes stronger, is able to walk again with support, can enter the public realm in a limited fashion, take on wifedom and motherhood. What Ermine has to learn, as much as the misguided Rachel, is that a woman's mission cannot be independent of men, that it is always a "sub-mission". As Margaret regains temporary health from her engagement to Alan, so Ermine can only be truly healthy in relationship to Colin. Her words of advice to Rachel about the need to marry apply equally to herself; marriage "will make you much more really useful and effective than ever you could have been alone" for

we are not the strongest creatures in the world, so we must resign ourselves to our fate, and make the best of it. *They* must judge how many imperfections they choose to endure, and we can only make the said drawbacks as little troublesome as may be. (*Clever Woman*, 283, emphasis in original)

That which is implied but not spoken of in Yonge's text, as in all her work, relates to sexuality, in the same way that medical manuals prescribed marriage, a euphemism for sexual activity, as a cure for female disorders. Ermine regains the use of her disabled body and her physical allure, once she accepts marriage as her "fate". Her brother comments to Colin, "Ermine is indeed as attractive as ever, and has improved in health far more than I durst expect. I suppose it is your all-powerful influence" (*Clever Woman*, 332). In Yonge's scheme of things, however, the physical is always of lesser importance than the spiritual element. Ermine walks in order to get to church, and the picture of her married bliss once again brings heaven into the domestic realm:

The patient spirits had reached their home and haven, the earthly haven for loving hearts, the likeness of the heavenly haven, and as her head leant, at last, upon his shoulder, and his guardian arm encircled her, there was such a sense of calm that even the utterance of their inward thanksgiving, or of a word of tenderness would have jarred upon them. (*Clever Woman*, 359)

Illness and Woman's (Sub)Mission

Invalids are not the only characters to be ill, however. Illness is used in Yonge's texts to teach women their use in life, the path of their true mission. It is used, in fact, to feminize them. Ethel May, in *The Daisy Chain*, although never ill herself, learns through the illness and suffering of others, especially her sisters Margaret and Flora, that she must sacrifice her own ambitions and take her place within the family as helpmeet and companion to her father. Central to the novel is her process of socialization. At the beginning she is Etheldred the Unready, a clumsy, plain, impulsive teenage girl, whose lack of "natural" femininity is emphasized by her "thin, lank, angular, sallow" appearance (*Daisy Chain*, 13), and her inability to turn a patient in bed, make tea, or keep her skirts free of mud. Her dream is to write books, and her ambition is to keep up with her elder brother Norman in his progress through Latin and Greek. The paradox inherent in the early descriptions of Ethel is that femininity, although supposedly "natural", is shown also to be something that could, and ought to, be acquired. Similarly to authors as diverse as Ellis, Gaskell, and Braddon, Yonge shows that knowledge declared essential to woman's nature, such as how to make others comfortable, is not instinctive, but learned. Ethel does not find a natural grace, and Mary, at ten, is, like Gaskell's Molly Gibson, a tomboy with an approved love of play and getting dirty. Somewhere in their teenage years, girls have to change, and femininity must be imposed, curbing Ethel's "masculine" tendencies.²¹

²¹ For a discussion of Yonge's ideas on "refinement" see Bratton 181. Healthy outdoor play of girls and boys together is also shown in *Countess Kate*, (1862) and Kate, too, then has to learn proper refinement. Ellis deals with the same paradox, for example, in the chapter, "On The Training of Girls", in *Mothers of England* 321-361.

The death of her mother, Margaret's illness, and later Flora's marriage, combine to determine Ethel's unlikely role as housekeeper. Gradually she learns silence and restraint. Her "active, vigorous spirit" (*Daisy Chain*, 106) is tamed, domesticated, channelled into caring for her father, brothers and sisters, and teaching at Cocks Moor, a project which is approved of because it is "the best outlet for what might otherwise run to extravagance" and the mere hope of it has "already been an incentive to improvement in home duties" (*Daisy Chain*, 151). The greatest sacrifice she has to make is to give up her studies. Although younger than Norman, she has always kept up with him, even though he topped his class and is destined for Oxford. But, according to Sarah Ellis, "the possession of genius is, to a woman, a birthright of very questionable value".²² In Yonge's texts the woman of intelligence has to learn not to rival men. Ethel's studies are unhealthy, condemned because they take "her whole mind from her proper occupations", and go "beyond what benefits a young lady of her age". There is the possibility that they might make her suffer "ill effects" and "be hurtful to body as well as mind" (*Daisy Chain*, 177, 183). Margaret counsels Ethel in true feminine submission and advises her that:

we all know that men have more power than women, and I suppose the time has come for Norman to pass beyond you. He would not be cleverer than any one, if he could do no more than a girl at home. ... And for [Greek] would you give up being a useful, steady daughter and sister at home? The sort of woman that dear mamma wished to make you, and a comfort to papa. (*Daisy Chain*, 181)

Even her brother Norman adds his advice, in a tone which it is difficult not to read as relieved, that "I assure you, Ethel, it is really time for you to stop, or you would get into a regular learned lady, and be good for nothing" (*Daisy Chain*, 182). To all this Ethel agrees "faintly" (*Daisy Chain*, 181) and, although she shows

²² Ellis, *Women of England* 92.

some doubt - "I was just going to say I hated being a woman, and having these tiresome little trifles - my duty - instead of learning" (*Daisy Chain*, 182) - she exhibits true femininity in following that duty. Self-sacrifice in Yonge's work, unlike in Gaskell's, brings health rather than illness, and "the higher the mind, the readier the submission" (*Daisy Chain*, 183).

Although Ethel's sacrifice might appear to be a waste of human potential, the crushing of her ambition, it is not allowed to become so in the text. For Yonge happiness and goodness are inextricably interlinked. Kathleen Tillotson, writing of *The Heir of Redclyffe*, claims astutely that Yonge made goodness "attractive".²³ Ethel's choice shows her to be good, and therefore she is rewarded with what Yonge perceived as womanly happiness, the role, though not the actuality, of wife and mother. As Margaret remarks to her father, though Ethel "does love learning, her real love is for goodness, and for you papa" (*Daisy Chain*, 183). Ethel is able to carry out her more "feminine" ambition, the establishment of a school and the building of a church at Cocksmoor. She is "truly a mother" (*Daisy Chain*, 667) to the younger children, and a wife-like companion to her father, "his other self" (*Trial*, 193). Once again, therefore, feminine desire is constructed in terms of a seemingly sexless maternity and companionate wifhood. Ethel's greatest reward is her faith. Where the text wavers, however, is at Ethel's moments of doubt as the children leave home and she faces various trials, and the possibility looms of her "becoming comparatively solitary in the course of years". At such times she recalls the greater domestic sphere of the family of God, her "treasure above", "the Communion with them, if not their presence" (*Daisy Chain*, 667). Home and church are inseparable: "her corner in the Minster, her table at home with her Bible and Prayer-book, were still the same, and witnessed many an outpouring of

²³ Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson, *Mid-Victorian Studies* (London: University of London, the Athlone Press, 1965) 54.

her anxiety" (*The Trial*, 276). Without the plenitude provided by faith, the essential discursive underpinning of Yonge's text, Ethel's reward might seem hollow indeed.

Where Ethel's domestic role is enforced by the illness of others, Rachel Curtis in *The Clever Woman of the Family* is feminized by being ill herself. Rachel too is established as "masculine" at the beginning of the novel. She and her sister Grace are "the maiden sisters of Avonmouth, husband and wife to one another, as maiden sisters always are" (*Clever Woman*, 1). A vigorous woman, she longs to right the injustices she perceives about her, lamenting "here I sit with health, strength, and knowledge, and able to do nothing, *nothing*" (*Clever Woman*, 3, emphasis in original). She is the one Yonge character who talks openly of woman's mission, and through Rachel Yonge constructs her ideal of feminine sub-mission. Rachel's mistake is to despise the domestic, and seek a role in the public sphere:

I had far rather become the founder of some establishment that might relieve women from the oppressive task-work thrown on them in all branches of their labour. Oh, what a worthy ambition! (*Clever Woman*, 3)

Like Ethel, she is a romantic dreamer and has to learn to come to terms with the everyday details of life. One by one the theories she expounds are shown up to be ill-founded, impracticable, or even dangerous. In each case where she challenges, or holds opinions critical of, a "masculine" sphere of activity she is proven wrong. Despite her theories about education, she cannot gain the respect or control of Fanny's boys because she does not understand children. The army officers turn out to be far from shallow and frivolous, as she believed them to be. Her attempt to set up a school to rescue small girls from the drudgery of lace-making leads her to be tricked by a con-man. The children are worse off than

ever, and she faces public humiliation in court for her "stupidity", a humiliation made even more bitter by her previous contempt for the legal profession. Her belief in homeopathic medicine helps hasten the death of her protégée, lace-maker Lovedy Kelland.

Yet although Rachel is often handled somewhat satirically, it is with an understanding edge. Her character is a construction of frustration and thwarted desire. How did a woman of her acknowledged ability find a worthy ambition that was not deemed unwomanly? Unmarried at twenty-five, she wishes to be no longer treated as a girl. Her social conscience is allowed no real expression, trapped within the restrictions of lady-hood:

I am a young lady forsooth! - I must not be out late; I must not put forward my views; I must not choose my acquaintance; I must be a mere helpless, useless being, growing old in a ridiculous fiction of prolonged childhood, affecting the graces of so-called sweet seventeen that I never had - because, because why? Is it for any better reason than because no mother can bear to believe her daughter no longer on the lists for matrimony? (*Clever Woman*, 3)

For Yonge, Rachel's problem is that she has no man in the family to guide her. With her mother always trembling on the verge of ill health and nerves, Rachel sets herself up as the head of the family. Extolled as "the clever woman of the family", she is unable to realize that her cleverness is really bookishness with no practical grasp of "real meaning". Her main fault is her sense of superiority. She thinks herself better than those around her and lets them know it; she lectures and preaches, without seeing that others do not want to know or that what she says does not make practical sense - in the mouth of a woman. However, the text undercuts much of the negativity about Rachel's actions. She is more intelligent and able than the other women in her family. Although pompous, she is always well meaning. The text shows as well that many of her

ideas make sense when they are articulated by a man. Rachel's failed scheme for an industrial school, for example, succeeds once Alick begins to manage the family's affairs. Rachel's lesson, therefore, is to find something useful to do with her life, as a woman, not by trying to be like a man. She has to be feminized, find her natural "womanhood", and this is done through illness. After shaming herself in the community at the trial, she falls ill, initially of diphtheria, then of nervous anxiety. Her "punishment" for emulating men is unsparing:

It seemed as if nothing else had been wanting to make humiliation and exposure complete. Rachel had despised fainting ladies, and had really hitherto been so superabundant in strength that she had no experience of the symptoms, or she might have escaped in time. But there she lay, publicly censured before the dignitaries of her county for moral folly, and entirely conquered before the rest of the world by the physical weakness she most contemned. (*Clever Woman*, 266)

Weak, vulnerable, in need of protection, she renounces every dogma she had, and comes to value its opposite:

I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or to want any one to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery, and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself. And this - and this is such a break down, my blunders and their consequences have been so unspeakably dreadful, and now instead of suffering, dying - as I felt I ought - it has only made me just like other women, for I know I could not live without him, and then all the rest of it must come for his sake. (*Clever Woman*, 266)

Nevertheless, Rachel's marriage and submission, should not, in Yonge's terms, be read as a defeat but as a reward. In this guise Rachel is able to find ways to use her undoubted talents, as a better kind of mother, and as an army wife, working from a position of usefulness, selflessness, being an influence for good, although it is Alick who implements her plans. In this guise she becomes much

more likeable; her doubts are replaced by happiness, her intense seriousness by laughter.

The clearest statement of Yonge's ideas is made when Rachel faces her religious doubts. In the "tranquil activity of the Rectory" (*Clever Woman*, 304), Alick's uncle, the blind Mr Clare, teaches Rachel that many of her "errors" had "chiefly arisen from the want of someone whose superiority she could feel". The authorial voice reinforces the point that

after all, unwilling as she would have been to own it, a woman's tone of thought is commonly moulded by the masculine intellect, which, under one form or another, becomes master of her soul. Those opinions, once made her own, may be acted and improved upon, often carried to lengths never thought of by their inspirer, or held with noble constancy and perseverance even when he himself may have fallen from them, but from some living medium they are almost always adopted, and thus, happily for herself, a woman's efforts at scepticism are but blind faith in her chosen leader, or, at the utmost, in the spirit of the age. (*Clever Woman*, 337)

Yonge's construction of true femininity and woman's mission, therefore, although constraining, did offer some outlet for talented women such as Ethel and Rachel. According to this passage, women might at times exceed the good of men, although it has to be acknowledged that men have the initiatory idea. At the same time, however, the passage unsettles these certainties and raises other questions. Was a woman's faith to be similarly second-hand? Where was Yonge herself, and her authority as an author, despite Keble's "control", situated in her own argument? Such an acknowledgement in many ways excuses women for any "errors" of thought. Rachel, although punished, is never condemned, for her fault lay in being "ill" guided. True health comes from accepting her feminine role and womanly submission.

A similar, although more severe, form of feminization of a character occurs in *Heartsease*. Theodora Martindale overcomes her jealousy of her beloved brother's wife, and her pride, which has caused pain and dissension in the family, only after being severely burnt in the fire which destroys the pretentious family mansion.²⁴ She courageously tries to save her great-aunt, Mrs Nesbit, a figure of aristocratic snobbishness and "unwomanly" ambition whom Theodora resembles and might have turned into, if it was not for her own "innate" nobility of character and the positive feminine example provided by her sister-in-law, Violet. Theodora's reward is to learn submission, marry the man who has always loved her, and become worthy of her own name, a valued gift in the family of God. Her initial helplessness is a shock to her mother, to see her "hitherto healthy and independent, so completely prostrated". Lady Martindale's maternal feelings, "so long stifled or thrust aside" (*Heartsease*, 390) by the negative influence of Mrs Nesbit, are finally awakened, and Theodora is able to be

content to be helpless; as there she lay, murmuring thanks, and submitting to be petted with a grateful face of childlike peace, resting in her mother's affection, and made happy by the depth of warm feeling in her father's words. (*Heartsease*, 391)

Theodora has to recognize that her "rampant health" has helped to make her "the more wayward" and that "it is indeed sometimes a blessing to be laid up. It brings out so much kindness. It is the easiest of all the crosses" (*Heartsease*, 410).

In each of these cases Yonge uses illness to constitute a womanly essentiality and a mode of femininity which combines active and passive elements; energy, intelligence, and strength of character, rather than being constructed as

²⁴ Charlotte M. Yonge, *Heartsease, or, The Brother's Wife* (1854; London: MacMillan, 1885). All page references will hereafter be given in parentheses in the body of the text after the title *Heartsease*.

“masculine”, are reclaimed in her texts by being harnessed to wifedom and maternity, the “natural” desire of all women, and then channelled through submission, from the domestic to the wider public sphere.

Illness and Transgression: Crime and Punishment?

For Rachel, Theodora, or Ethel, their transgressions are in many ways merely carrying to excess their natural talents and essential womanliness. As a result they are “feminized” and returned to the normative path of true femininity. However, women who transgress beyond the bounds of what Yonge perceived as acceptable are constructed in her texts as characters who must be punished much more severely for such behaviour. Laura Edmonstone (*The Heir of Redclyffe*), Flora May (*The Daisy Chain*), Bessie Keith (*The Clever Woman of the Family*), and Alda Underwood (*The Pillars of the House*) exhibit various but related forms of transgression, through deceit, or selfishness, or ambition.²⁵ All, in some way, transgress the norms of accepted sexuality. Theirs are not the adulterous or bigamous outrages of the sensation novel, but nevertheless each chooses to marry for a reason other than the “feminine” desire to be helpmeet and mother, that is, for a reason not pertaining to sexuality.

The least severe of the punishments these characters suffer is the loss of their “bloom”. Such an image sites true feminine desire on the side of nature, while desire other than healthy sexuality (motherhood) can be perceived as unnatural in a woman. Laura enters into a long secret engagement with her cousin Philip Morville, and although she might be excused because she has been led astray by his unwise counsel and is unaware that she has done wrong, nevertheless her secret weighs upon her, she becomes ill at ease, and loses her

²⁵ Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853; London: Duckworth, 1964). Further references will be made in parentheses in the text after the title *Heir*.

youthful beauty. Though still "prettier than ever", "there was something either added or taken away, which made it appear that the serenity and carelessness of early youth fled from her, and the air of the cares of life had come over her" (*Heir*, 134). Over the years time "had given her more self-command, or, perhaps, more properly speaking, had hardened her" (*Heir*, 135). Laura's transgressions are disobedience in deceiving her parents, and more seriously, of idolizing Philip.

In Laura Yonge presents a case for some independence on the part of the woman as an individual, and shows the problems of total submission. A woman, although subject to the guidance of men, has to weigh up that advice and come to her own sense of right. Moreover, other discourses than the solely rational or religious can aid a girl's education. At eighteen, Laura "had no experience, not even in novels" (*Heir*, 94) of what she has done. Philip advises her to give up her drawing, for it tempts her to daydream, and to take up algebra, "to strengthen the powers of her mind", not realizing that he is "only leading her to stifle meditation, and thus securing her complete submission to him" (*Heir*, 119). She believes Philip to always be right, "would never have dreamt of questioning wherever he might choose to lead her" (*Heir*, 94), and

so surrendered her judgment to her idol, that no thought could ever cross her that he had enjoined what was wrong. Her heart and soul were his alone, and she left the future to him without an independent desire or reflection. (*Heir*, 135)

When Philip finally reaches a state of repentance and becomes aware of his own self-deception, pride and jealousy, Laura cannot match him in suitable humility, for she cannot believe that he might have been wrong. In making him first in all, rather than just "first earthly thing" (*Heir*, 431), she has not gained "full

satisfaction and repose" but nervous illness. Their marriage is not to be the rapturous idyll experienced by Amy and Guy, because for Philip,

though his love for her was unchanged, it now and then was felt, though not owned by him, that she was not fully a helpmeet, only a "Self"; not such a "Self" as he had left at St. Mildred's [his worldly sister], but still reflecting on him his former character, instead of aiding him to a new one. (*Heir*, 432).

A woman, therefore, in learning submission is not to lose all of her individuality. Although still defined in relation to a man, she is not to be a mere reflection of him, but complementary; not to give in "blind obedience", but to follow first of all what "became" herself (*Heir*, 455). Laura, for her transgression, is finally denied the fullness of womanhood, true wife- and motherhood. As wife of a distinguished parliamentarian she spends her time

between watching [Philip] and tending his health, and in the cares and representations befitting her station, with little space for domestic pleasure and home comfort, knowing her children more intimately through her sister's observation than through her own. (*Heir*, 463)

Alda and Flora are two other characters who lose their "bloom", when they enter the more public sphere of society and marry for ambition. Alda suffers from a sense of false gentility, is dissatisfied with the domestic drudgery of her provincial home, and welcomes the chance to be adopted into her uncle's London house to be educated alongside her cousin Marilda. To Alda's twin sister, Wilmet, the sacrificial mother figure of the novel, beauty is a trial. She wishes to be more than ornamental, and proves her worth by caring for her ten younger orphaned siblings, combining domestic usefulness with classical beauty. Wilmet is rewarded by a "true" marriage, of love (and its silenced corollary of sexual attraction), and blessed with sons. Alda, manipulative and deceitful, cares only for herself. She engages herself to the man loved by her plainer cousin,

breaks off the engagement by injuring her younger sister's reputation, and finally marries for title and money. Her husband gambles the family wealth and despises her for providing only (seven) daughters. After the birth of her second child, Alda "looked very thin and worn, as if much less recovered than Wilmet, who had a beautiful fresh bloom, and was vigorous while Alda was languid" (*Pillars*, II, 191). Nevertheless, although Alda is made to suffer for her decision, Yonge does not condemn her entirely. Her beauty and ornamental role might objectify her, but even objects have their use. She provides a centre of admiration and social desirability in her aunt's house, and on a visit, her younger sister thought "she had never known how nice Alda could be in her proper element" (*Pillars*, II, 41). Thus, by choosing to contrast twins, Yonge constructs two contradictory faces of womanhood: the active subject in Wilmet, the passive object in Alda. Both are useful in their own way, but activity is the more preferred.

The portrayal of Flora May is a more complex issue than that of Alda Underwood. In many ways she combines the positive elements of both the Underwood twins. Flora, also left in her teenage years to help in a motherless household, is, in contrast to her sister Ethel, womanly and domesticated. With her feminine name, and practical ways, she is a manager, a true "Ellis" woman, excelling in domestic organization and the running of the local community ladies. Once married to George Rivers, and taking a place of importance in the community, as well as entering the social world of London, she can live out her ambitions, and find an outlet for her very definite personal skills. George, with her encouragement, enters parliament, a role for which he is highly unsuited, and Flora is able to become "a Roman matron" (*Daisy Chain*, 151), the power behind the throne:

Her husband was devotedly attached to her, and was entirely managed by her; and though her good judgement kept her from appearing visibly in matters not pertaining to her own sphere, she was, in fact, his understanding. She read, listened, and thought for him, imbued him with her own views, and composed his letters for him; ruling his affairs both political and private, and undeniably making him fill a position which, without her, he would have left vacant; nor was there any doubt that he was far happier for finding himself of consequence, and being no longer left a charge upon his own hands. He seemed fully to suffice to her as a companion, although she was so far superior in power; for it was, perhaps, her nature to love best that which depended upon her, and gave her a sense of exercising protection. (*Daisy Chain*, 561)

Although all Yonge's women have to find their "work", Flora's transgression is to take on work that was "rightfully" a man's. When she is caught writing George's speech for him soon after her confinement, there is unwitting irony in her father's statement that she will "suffer for it" (*Daisy Chain*, 488). To her reply that she has to work and use her wits, he answers, "looking at the babe", "Is there not work enough for them here?" Flora has to learn the lesson that motherhood should be her true work, and that it is only self-deception to transform her own desires into terms of wifely submission: "What could be a greater duty than to incite her husband to usefulness?" (*Daisy Chain*, 489). Although she sighs over "the briefness of the time that she could bestow on her child or on home correspondence", she admits that "her achievements were a positive pleasure to her" (*Daisy Chain*, 561).

For this transgressive desire Flora is punished by the death of her child, overdosed on the opiate Godfrey's Cordial by an ignorant nurse, and her own subsequent long illness, where she is reduced to being "weak and trembling", needing "the support of her father's arm" (*Daisy Chain*, 573). The road to her final acceptance of the support of her Father is a long one. Kathleen Tillotson has written that "Charlotte Yonge generally punishes her worldly and self-

sufficient characters by giving them what they once wanted".²⁶ Having encouraged George into parliament, Flora has to continue in that lifestyle, although its glories are now hollow to her, to follow the duty that she has originally used to mask her own ambitions:

"for George's sake, I must bear with my present life, and do the best I can with it, unless some leading comes for an escape; and that the glare, and weariness, and being spoken well of, must be taken as punishment for having sought after these things." (*Daisy Chain*, 664)

Even in her spirit of repentance, Flora, like Laura, is not allowed the true joys of maternal fulfilment. Her second child's difficult and withdrawn behaviour in the novel *The Trial*, could also be blamed on Flora's neglect, her agitation at the birth, and continuing social lifestyle.²⁷ Nevertheless, in the end, despite the dreadful things that happen to her, Flora remains a powerful woman. For a while her illness debilitates her, and disempowers her since it decentres her life. Until she finds a centre again she remains powerless. That centre is her faith, regained through Margaret's reading the Bible to her. But although her old life is portrayed as being lesser than the domestic life at Stoneborough, Flora still holds temporal power. Thus, although we are meant to disapprove of Flora's worldliness and personal ambition, and to count their cost, and although she is redeemed through illness, insight, and the regaining of faith, Flora's is one source of power for women in Charlotte Yonge's world. The role of helpmeet, for an intelligent practical woman, could extend from the domestic to the public sphere, provided there is the suitable pretence of invisibility, an invisibility reinforced by Flora's subsequent marginality in the texts.

²⁶ Tillotson 55.

²⁷ Annis Gillie diagnoses the child as autistic, using textual evidence to show a lack of affectionate relationship between Flora and the child, what would now be termed "bonding", 105. Whatever the disorder Margaret Rivers suffers from, it shows how completely Flora is punished for her lack of mothering.

Bessie Keith is not ambitious for social position. Charming, vivacious, and feminine, she is nevertheless selfish, and marries a much older man in order, it turns out, to pay off her mounting debts. Only her brother Alick sees through her guileless, attractive exterior. Bessie, in fact, subverts the feminine ideal of the pleasing woman; by appearing to please others, she does what pleases herself. In this way she is another "clever woman of the family". Her frivolity is exposed when Rachel's serious search for "woman's mission" turns out, in Bessie's case, to be no more than a passion for croquet, and her teasing leads to Rachel becoming involved with the man who swindles her. Bessie's marriage is worldly, indeed a form of prostitution, following the lure of "the hoards" for which she "had sold herself" (*Clever Woman*, 342). Her illness is occasioned by a literal "fall". She trips over a croquet hoop while fleeing the young man who has invited her to run away with him. The fall induces premature labour, and her subsequent death (in the chapter entitled "The End of Cleverness") results from her wilfulness, and her guilt, a form of punishment for her deception. Still a child herself she will never have the rewards of motherhood since she is not worthy of them. Bessie's subversion of the feminine ideal, and the paradox of the pleasing woman, is expressed as a split within her nature, a doubleness "so integral that nothing could put it off". When told of her impending death "she fully comprehended, but as if she and herself were two separate persons" (*Clever Woman*, 312), and after her death "all was at an end - that double thread of brilliant good-nature and worldly selfishness, with the one strand of sound principle sometimes coming into sight" (*Clever Woman*, 315). Later when her debts are discovered, Colonel Keith comments that "she must have persuaded at least one half of herself that she was acting for every one's good except her own" (*Clever Woman*, 341). The duality so constructed creates a tension not easily resolved within the text, for in trying to explain this paradox of woman's "nature" Yonge relies on the alternative dichotomy of nurture and nature.

While punishing Bessie for something that is “natural”, woman’s vanity, she also excuses her: as Ermine remarks “if she had faults, they were those of her day and her training” (*Clever Woman*, 332).

The transgressions committed by Yonge’s women might seem negligible, but they are fundamental errors according to her construction of the domestic ideal. Woman’s desire is constituted as a desire for marriage and motherhood; this is Yonge’s normative sexuality, even though the marriages in her text often appear to be desexualized, based on sibling and filial relationships. Love is based on spiritual rather than physical bonding. Marriages are to be companionate or between mentor and pupil, an arrangement which allows Yonge to portray domestic relationships of fathers and daughters, such as Dr May and Ethel, or of brothers and sisters, such as the Underwood family, in the terminology of marriage without the hint of incest.²⁸ Single women, too, could benefit from a marriage-like domestic situation, because marriage is not only natural, but necessary for the protection of women, to give them that guidance essential for their “weaker” status. Geraldine Underwood comments, in a discussion of woman’s rights

marriage gives woman a head; so I think the married ones at least do not suffer so much in character from misbelief. Family life affords a sort of religion to those who do not know the truth; and so, while man kept them in subjection, they did not need to think it out, as the single ones must do now. (*Pillars*, II, 364)²⁹

²⁸ Most frequently in Yonge’s texts the “approved” marriages are either between young people where one of the couple has been almost adopted into the family of the other, or between much older men and young girls. For the former, examples are the marriages of Norman May and Meta Rivers in *The Daisy Chain*, Blanche May and Hector Earncliffe in *The Trial*, (Aubrey May comments, “I tell Blanche that he only took her for the pleasure of being my father’s son”, *Trial*, 2), or Amy Edmonstone and Guy Morville in *The Heir of Redclyffe*. For the latter, see below, as well as the discussion of Fanny’s marriage in *The Clever Woman of the Family*. In that novel Ermine Williams maintained the fantasy of bringing up her little niece Rose to be the perfect wife for her own love, Colin Keith.

²⁹ Yonge seldom deals with the question of the unworthy husband. Alda Underwood must endure almost in silence her unhappiness at the boorish hand of her upper class husband, and the implication is that this is a punishment for her own social ambition. Her father led his wife, on a

And when her older brother, the head of the family, dies, Geraldine is as bereft as if he had been her husband, for "the unmarried woman seldom escapes a widowhood of the spirit" (*Pillars*, II, 498).

Yonge's domestic ideal is devoid of physical passion, for the passions must be controlled, and is based on an analogy with her religion. I would agree with Catherine Storr who has argued that it was not "the mystical, the ecstatic, the erotic aspect of religion" which inspired Yonge, but "the more prosaic pleasures of parental approval and affection".³⁰ Thus Yonge's characters do not undergo "spectacular spiritual conversions", but are regenerated by the realization of the "everyday applicability of the creed" to which they already belong. Storr continues:

In the secular field the same holds true: the emphasis, in her treatment of romantic love, is not its irrational, unpredictable course, but on the necessity for it to fit in with the existing family pattern.³¹

In Yonge's texts, long engagements, with no passion, only strengthen affective ties: "if the romance is less, there has been a deeper, quieter affection and confidence".³² Even the transgressive women stray not for reasons of

matter of principle, into a state of penury and hardship from which they both died. His actions, however, are lauded as heroic, for the Church and faith triumphed over worldly, mercenary considerations. A most interesting ambivalence in the text exists in the form of Mrs Underwood's journal which is never opened for the reader. Any doubts or complaints about her husband's actions are thus silenced, but at the same time the journal's appearance in the text allows for a potential dissent.

³⁰ Catherine Storr, "Parents", Battiscombe and Laski 111.

³¹ Storr 112.

³² Charlotte M. Yonge, "Last Heartsease Leaves" (1862), Battiscombe and Laski 137. The engagement was of Helen, young daughter of Violet Martindale, to Lord St. Erme, who had once proposed to her aunt Theodora. Violet approved of the marriage, despite the discrepant ages, because Helen's "elder brother is so little older", and "she should have some one to look up to so entirely, far better than if he had been nearer her own age".

passion. Their gravest error is to step beyond the immediate family, either geographically or socially, and to put "self first". They choose to marry for reasons other than natural attraction/desire, and choose husbands who can be neither assimilated back into the family circle nor suitable authorities within their own households. They step outside the domesticated family of God, and the rewards of goodness and happiness. Yet at the same time, they problematize the text, by showing women who are not evil, but wrongly advised or ambitious. Illness "punishes" them and they are deprived of the "natural" fulfilment of desire, but they are not always disempowered.

"Regularly tamed": illness and the domestication of men

If the analogy of religion and marriage is made for women in Yonge's novels, it is equally so for men. During the discussion of women's rights alluded to above, Gertrude May reiterates Geraldine's lesson that

woman working every one for her own hand, is all nohow, either grim or silly, the laughing stock of gods and men; while working for the Church makes all harmonious, and sets each in her place.
(*Pillars*, II, 363)

To this Lance Underwood replies, "It might as well be man as woman". In her construction of the body of Christianity, Yonge emphasizes "feminine" emotional commitment through the example of the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, rather than the masculinity of "muscular" Christianity. Geraldine Underwood asks, "How could Edgar say patient, silent, self-devotion was not to be found except in woman" (*Pillars*, I, 152). There is little "muscular" Christianity expressed or even discussed in Yonge's texts. In *The Trial*, Leonard Ward is involved in a fight over the outcome of a cricket match, and Tom jokes that he was becoming "a muscular Christian". Ethel then inquires, "is a

muscular Christian one who has muscles, or one who trusts in muscles?" (*Trial*, 70). The association of cricket, fighting and muscular Christianity relegates them to the masculine, and in Yonge's text marginalized, realm of the public sphere. Christianity in her novels is decidedly domesticated: not theological debate but the building and decoration of churches. Her characters have their trials and crosses to bear, but any straying from orthodoxy happens, like cricket and fighting, in absentia, beyond the page, and is merely reported in secure familial and domestic settings. Thus Rachel Curtis's doubts are only mentioned and never described; Norman May's temptations at Oxford are routed before he returns home; and Edgar Underwood's decadent lifestyle is the subject of hearsay.

Although womanliness and manliness are constructed in the texts on strictly gendered lines, and although Yonge upholds the doctrine that women are inferior to men, because the domestic and the feminine are centralized in her texts, and the feminine virtues of patience and suffering so valorized, the ideology of difference is always being undermined. Not only women but men are feminized by illness in her novels. Sometimes this works in conventional ways. Weak, sickly Aubrey May, too much under the influence of his sisters, is not allowed to take up the life of scholarship, because "a scholar is a kind of woman" (*Trial*, 259). Instead, under the manly influence of his brother Tom, he becomes "robust" (*Trial*, 260), and a soldier. Likewise, his older brother Norman, as a young man, suffers from nervous complaints which he thought "only fit for fine ladies" (*Daisy Chain*, 117). His father hopes he will see him "a healthy, vigorous, useful man" rather than "a poor puling wretch of a scholar" (*Daisy Chain*, 118). As an adult, having entered the Church, Norman's "morbid sensitiveness" (*Daisy Chain*, 478) and fastidiousness are feminine traits which count against him. Norman's negative feminine weakness is more than complemented by Meta's powerful and useful feminine strength when they emigrate to New Zealand as missionaries.

However, more importantly, there are examples where the "feminine" in men is a source of strength, without undermining their manliness. Alick Keith, in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, received the Victoria Cross for heroic action in India.³³ His illness, convalescence and recurrent bouts of fever serve to feminize him. He is initially perceived by Rachel as "almost a boy, slim and light, just of the empty young officer type", a "dapper boy" (*Clever Woman*, 54, 57). She prejudices him - "a man must be contemptible who wore gloves at so small a party when she did not" (*Clever Woman*, 57) - without the knowledge that he covers his hands to hide the burns. His appearance is feminine, "very young indeed were both face and figure, fair and pale", and he moves "in a languid, easy posture" (*Clever Woman*, 80). Yet he himself realizes "that suffering sharpened my perceptions, and helplessness gave me time to draw conclusions" (*Clever Woman*, 189) and that "it was not for nothing that he had spent a year upon the sofa in the irritably sensitive state of nerves" (*Clever Woman*, 276). As a result he has become "a first-rate nurse" (*Clever Woman*, 337). Patience, suffering, sacrifice, and sensitivity are the feminine strengths that Alick possesses, and it is his perceptiveness that recognizes Rachel's true worth, allowing him to gain her "meek submission" (*Clever Woman*, 284). Their marriage, based on these feminine strengths, restores her health and invites her conclusion that "I am not fit to be anything but an ordinary married woman, with an Alick to take care of me". Moreover such a marriage is important because of the multiplicity of desires that she fulfils:

It had not occurred to Rachel, but she was certainly of far more positive use in the world at the present moment than ever she had been in her most assuming maiden days. (*Clever Woman*, 345)

³³ Note that both Alick and Ermine suffer illness from being "blown up", a parallel in heroism, but there is no Victoria Cross for her, merely the cross of suffering and sacrifice.

Suffering and redemption through illness are more closely worked out in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, in the intertwined lives of Guy Morville and his cousin Philip. "Stern", "reserved", "firm" and "resolute" (*Heir*, 44, 56), Philip suffers from "a severity, an unwillingness to trust", a "perfect self-command" (*Heir*, 44, 81). In his unbending masculinity and patriarchal upholding of the law, he cannot see that he is motivated by jealousy and pride towards the open, frank and warm-hearted Guy. His self-deception brings hardship and suffering to the Edmonstones and in the end is instrumental in Guy's death, when Guy returns selflessly to nurse Philip through a fever, catches the fever and dies. Philip learns remorse and humility, becomes less strong, more gentle, and "regularly tamed" (*Heir*, 420). In Guy's case his illness allows the process of his final apotheosis and secures his future as a domestic icon. His constant fear of his "passions", the fiery temper he had inherited from his male forebears, is monitored by his equally constant self-questioning and eagerness to overcome his faults, to "tame" his nature (*Heir*, 453). He teaches others by his example, unlike Philip who instructs by words of advice. Where Philip is Laura's false idol, Guy serves as a saviour figure. He suffers injustice cheerfully, rescues men from the waves during the storm and shipwreck, sacrifices his own life for that of his cousin, and his final canonization is indicated by the portrait in front of which Amy keeps her cross. For Charles, Guy had "let in the sunlight from heaven" upon him (*Heir*, 462), and as a widow Amy

missed him indeed, but the power of finding rest in looking forward to meeting him, the pleasure of dwelling on the days he had been with her, and the satisfaction of doing his work for the present, had made a happiness for her, and still in him, quiet, grave, and subdued, but happiness likely to bloom more and more brightly throughout her life. (*Heir*, 447)

Guy's portrait links the domestic, the religious and the chivalric elements of the novel. An unfinished sketch by the painter Shene, who used it as a model

for a painting of Sir Galahad kneeling to adore the San Greal, it is also Amy's reminder of Guy, the centre of her domestic shrine, by her bed at night and in her dressing-room during the day, shown "morning and evening" to her daughter and called "papa" "so that his child might never recollect a time when he had not been a familiar and beloved idea" (*Heir*, 459). For Amy, as for Margaret May, the dead beloved can be read as both spiritual and sexual icon. The aspects of chivalry that Yonge presents can also be seen as part of the feminizing process. By drawing selectively on such a discourse she valorizes those feminine attributes such as sensitivity, self-sacrifice, love and gentleness, and in making goodness a personal quest, she domesticates such virtues. Thus she presents an alternative discourse to the predatory commercialized aggressive masculinity of the Victorian public sphere.

The feminine woman: the picture of health.

The truly good women in Yonge's novels usually represent healthy domestic femininity and the strong feminine virtues. Although they might search for a "mission" or "work" such fulfilment is not to be found outside maternity and the usefully domestic. Although Fanny Temple, in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, appears to be submissive, dependent and ill, her weakness belies her inner strength. Her aunt and cousins still treat her as helpless and childish, and are surprised if she acts for herself, showing, in Rachel's eyes, "the audacity of such an independent measure" (*Clever Woman*, 35). Their treatment of her shows they are not aware of her more public life abroad, as a General's wife, a discrepancy in perception which is brought to light when the former army colleagues of her husband arrive. The difference in perception is underlined not only by the way in which Fanny is treated by the different parties, but also by the two opposing discourses Yonge draws upon to

signify the difference: the weak femininity of the infantilized woman, and the strong femininity of the reigning queen.

To her cousins and aunt Fanny's maternity is a form of illness. She suffers from "much ill-health and numerous children" (*Clever Woman*, 5). She has "an air of dependence almost beseeching protection" (*Clever Woman*, 8). Rachel sees her as "feeble, helpless, sickly!" (*Clever Woman*, 8), and echoes Sarah Ellis in lecturing Fanny: "A mother of contracted mind forfeits the allegiance of her sons". Yet, Rachel's "requisite of good sense and firmness, and a thorough sense of responsibility" (*Clever Woman*, 19) proves less effective than Fanny's staunch belief in her boys, who in turn revere her. As an example of infantilized femininity, her life has been "almost a prolonged childhood"; from the time of her marriage at sixteen, "she was almost constantly disabled by her state of health", that is, her seven pregnancies in nine years, and was kept additionally languid and helpless by the effects of the climate in India and Australia. Her elderly husband's sudden death, which had left her in a state of "utter prostration and illness" (*Clever Woman*, 24), was "to her more like the loss of her own father than of the father of her children". Further maternity and the return to England, however, are redemptive. The birth of her daughter, some time after the death of her husband, brings "a resumption of a feeling of health which had scarcely been tasted since the first plunge into warm climates" (*Clever Woman*, 25). In fact, Fanny's state of illness is frequently more perceived than real, the result of the expectations of those around her and the way they treat her:

delicate as Lady Temple was considered to be, unable to walk or bear fatigue, she never appeared incommoded by the uproar in which she lived, and had even been seen careering about the nursery, or running about the garden, in a way that Grace and Rachel thought would tire a strong woman. (*Clever Woman*, 23)

Her state of motherhood, rather than an illness, gives her strength, because it represents a form of "health".

In the company of Colonel Keith and Alick, however, Fanny is treated more as an adult, and "a slight look of wonder on the part of both the officers" is exchanged "at hearing their General's wife thus called to account" (*Clever Woman*, 55). Rachel cannot believe it is Fanny "eagerly asking questions and making remarks, quite at home and all animation, absolutely a different being from the subdued, meek little creature that Rachel had hitherto seen" (*Clever Woman*, 56). This Fanny, used to regimental status, although still meek and diminutive, is constructed through the metaphors of queenliness and feminine authority. She has been "a sort of little queen in her way", "almost always the first lady in the place", visiting sick soldiers as the "Queen of the East" with "that innocent, soft, helpless dignity of hers" (*Clever Woman*, 96, 181). Despite her general air of submissiveness it is Fanny who determinedly finds out the truth of the mistreatment of the children at Rachel's asylum, an episode expressed in military and political terms: "the simple statecraft of the General's widow" allows her to enter where others had failed, because "timid and tender as she might be, it was not for nothing that Fanny had been a vice-queen" (*Clever Woman*, 216, 215). She removes the children to the carriage and "then faced about to defend the rear":

a woman of thrice Fanny's energy and capacity would not have effected her purpose so simply, and made the virago in the matron so entirely quail. She swept forth with such a consciousness of power and ease that few could have had assurance enough to gainsay her. (*Clever Woman*, 217)

With Fanny Yonge reveals the inherent paradox of the feminine ideal, the silenced dainty "infans" contrasted with the assurance and dignity of the queen. Nevertheless, because Yonge teaches womanly submission, and because the

discourse of “queenliness” disguises the woman’s limited authority, the tension invoked by the paradox is heightened rather than resolved. Fanny remains more an “infanta” than a queen, reliant on the good advice first of her fatherly husband, and then of brotherly Colin Keith. Horrified by the investigation and trial, the outcome of her visit to the asylum, she retires from the public to the domestic arena, declaring it was “all my fault for having acted without asking advice. I hope I shall never do so again” (*Clever Woman*, 261).

Other women who are constructed as examples of feminine strength end up equally marginalized. Meta Rivers in *The Daisy Chain* and Amy Edmonstone in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, are both diminutive; Meta is affectionately known as “the hummingbird” and Amy as “silly little Amy”; yet both show strength in their search for a useful purpose in their lives. Amy finds it as a widow, in quietly but determinedly carrying out Guy’s work, withdrawn from the normative role of marriage in a “family” consisting of her child, herself, and her invalid brother Charles. An heiress, Meta spurns wealth and social prominence and seeks goodness through usefulness. She does not want the ornamental life of a young lady for “toys have a kindly mission, and I may be good for nothing else; but I would have rather been a coffee-pot than a china shepherdess” (*Daisy Chain*, 601). As Norman May’s wife she emigrates to New Zealand to assist his missionary endeavours, and any worries about her health are quickly countered:

I fancy household work would be more satisfactory, and less tiring, than doing a season thoroughly; and I mean to go through a course of Finchley manuals in preparation. (*Daisy Chain*, 617)

In *Heartsease*, Violet Martindale’s true Christian spirit of humility, piety and economy finally win over family prejudice, hostility, jealousy and her husband’s addiction to gambling. As her brother-in-law recognizes:

Every one else has acted, more or less, idiotically. She has gone about softening, healing, guarding, stirring up the saving part of each one's disposition.

When asked "How can this be? No one has spoken of her power", he replies, "It is too feminine to be recognised" (*Heartsease*, 525).

Yet in all of these cases of the "healthy" feminine woman, Yonge does not show one in a "normal" sexualized domestic situation. Although she centralizes the domestic sphere, and draws even the realm of heaven into its material bounds, her examples of positive feminine power are marginalized even here - Fanny, Amy, and Violet are all widowed, and Meta is removed from the text by her emigration.³⁴

It is difficult to read Yonge's texts in any way other than constrictive of women. Her construction of woman as inferior to man and womanhood as a state of submission to patriarchal values would seem to marginalize and imprison women in their "proper" domestic sphere, to reinforce and re-iterate the dominant ideology unquestioningly. Those women in her novels who do question or transgress are remorselessly punished - by burning, disfigurement, the death of their children, or their own death - or redeemed by marriage and maternity. Her construction of sexuality, that "network of pleasures and powers", is centred on a passionless desire for goodness. Goodness brings power, and for women, pleasure and happiness result from doing good, in physical, but more importantly, in spiritual terms, within the familial and familiar domestic sphere.

³⁴ Violet is not a widow in *Heartsease*, but has become one in "Last Heartsease Leaves". She lives with her son John, who thinks her "unrivalled in loveliness", and "indeed the trust and affection between those two [is] as intense as it can be without idolatry", Battiscombe and Laski 129.

Nevertheless, in her construction of femininity, rather than of womanhood, Yonge's texts can be read as subverting rigid gender dichotomies. The positive values of the "feminine" are prioritized in her texts, in men and women alike. Based on the figure of the feminized suffering Christ, her worthy characters are made to display, and be rewarded for, submission to duty, sensitivity, and caring for others. Goodness and happiness are yoked together, and shown as an attractive alternative to the loss of familial identity suffered by those who do not behave according to such tenets, often those who follow a "rational" ambitious and worldly way of life rather than the more emotional way of the spirit. Heaven and the world acquire a distinct materiality in Yonge's texts, and death is a mere transition from earthly domesticity to "the home beyond", "that everlasting Home where there is no parting", "in the House of the Lord above" (*Pillars*, II, 505, 514, 541).

Conclusion

"The general opinion of men is supposed to be, that the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother".¹ John Stuart Mill's statement deliberately establishes doubt about the ways by which femininity is constructed. It reveals, in fact, that femininity and the domestic ideal of womanhood *are* a construction, an "opinion of men" which sets itself up as fact and asserts the truth about women's nature. For Mill, "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing - the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others".² In this thesis I have shown aspects of that construction of femininity in the period 1840 to 1870, and the way in which illness was an essential part of it. I have looked at illness in a variety of different ways, as it appeared in a variety of discourses. Each discursive category did not stand alone, but formed part of the intersecting and interconnecting network of discourses which produce ideological structures. The debate on prostitution and the construction of women's sexuality in terms of illness and disease, for example, was to be found not only in essays and books which deal directly with that subject. Woman's appearance in public space and its interpretation in gendered and sexual terms was questioned in Gaskell's novels, and she rewrote the narrative of the fallen woman. The coded language of prostitution appeared in the form of transgressions of class and gender in the literary criticism of the sensation novel. Literature and medical writing was in turn utilized to give authority to the arguments of those writing on prostitution.

True femininity, according to the domestic ideal, was constituted in terms of gentleness, passivity, self-abnegation and maternal feeling. Woman's "natural"

¹ Mill 155.

² Mill 148.

desire, her sexuality, was licitly expressed in terms of maternity and reproduction. Maternity and a woman's whole reproductive life were regarded in terms of illness. Interpreted in another way, true femininity was constituted as other to masculinity. In the hierarchized oppositions which established this duality, masculine values, such as strength, activity, and health were matched by the feminine characteristics of weakness, passivity and illness. Either way, as we have seen, femininity produced that "eminently artificial thing", woman, and to be a woman was to be ill.

I have not argued, of course, that all women in this period were literally ill, although illness seemed to be an overwhelming fact of many women's lives, to the point that historians can write about the "cult of invalidism", and the stereotypical view of a Victorian woman is one of the delicate fainting lady.³ In looking at medical texts, however, and the debate on prostitution, I have shown how it is important to see the role illness plays in the construction of femininity. During the nineteenth century with the increasing secularization of society the new science of medicine and the men who pursued it moved into areas previously perceived as the domain of religion. At the same time, the various sections of the medical profession sought to establish their own authority and validity, professionally and socially, in a new ranking hierarchy of power. Increasingly, as the century progressed, there was the desire to keep women themselves out of these ranks. The debate on prostitution highlighted the way in which the discourses of medicine, science, law, social conscience, and the construction of woman's sexuality intersected. As we have seen, the more traditionally held belief that woman's desire was excessive and uncontrolled is found in these texts alongside the transformation of that desire into an innate

³ There has been no place in this thesis to look at the constraints and the dangers to health presented by fashion, restrictive clothing and tight lacing, for example, and their part in the construction of the delicately feminine.

desire for self-abnegation and for maternity. The opposition of class, figured as the transgressive, sexually assertive working-class woman and the passive, unaroused, maternal middle-class woman (in itself drawing upon the much older anti-feminist dichotomy of whore and madonna), is subordinated to the collectivity of gender. Such writing also presents the prostitute as being like her middle-class "sister", a passive victim of her own nature. However, since prostitution is also constructed in these texts as disease and contagion, this rhetorical move, I claim, serves to problematize the nature of the middle-class woman's sexuality, if, as is argued, she and the working-class woman are so alike. Similarly medical texts, whether they argue that women feel a "sexual" desire, or whether, according to physicians like William Acton, that desire is characterized as passive, self-abnegating and maternal, conflate class differences to stress the reproductive "illness" of all women. Texts such as these produced a normative femininity, pathologizing and declaring "unnatural" and "unhealthy" behaviours which did not conform to their ideal.

Medical texts and the debate on prostitution are examples of what Foucault has called "dominant" or "accepted", and what I have termed "authorized", discourses, transmitting and producing the power of middle-class patriarchal structures.⁴ The greater part of my thesis, however, has been involved with the writing of women, the way their texts engaged with these discourses and the construction of femininity, and the way illness figures in their work. As a novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell believed her writing had a social purpose. Her character Margaret Hale felt no sympathy with the London socialites who "talked about art in a merely sensuous way, dwelling on outside effects, instead of allowing themselves to learn what it has to teach".⁵ As we have seen, in her

⁴ Foucault, *Sexuality* Vol. 1 100.

⁵ *North and South* 396.

novels, Gaskell did not question certain aspects of the ideal of femininity, such as the fulfilment of women through marriage and motherhood. Nevertheless the concept of illness, especially that undefined condition generally designated the "decline", is utilized within her novels to show the dangers inherent in the feminine ideal, if it is taken to its literal conclusion. I have shown how the ideal of self-sacrifice is literalized in her novels, and how, in turn, each of her heroines faces the problem of the way in which to articulate her own subjectivity in a society which perceives her as an object, confines her to the domestic sphere, and allows her only silence. Rather than sacrificing her "self", Gaskell's heroine must negotiate a new definition of womanhood. For Gaskell, gender is not to be constrained in the strict duality of Ruskin's complementary nature of men and women. Characters within her novels break down this oppositional rigidity, allowing nurturing maternal men and strong passionate women. The ideology of the domestic ideal is exposed in Gaskell's works as empty and limiting, both to men and to women.

Unlike Gaskell's writing, the conduct books of Sarah Stickney Ellis and the novels of Charlotte Yonge reinforce the dichotomy of gender. Both appear to echo patriarchal discourse and express the superiority of men over women. Yet even these writers, I have argued, are engaged in a redefinition of femininity. They do not break down the boundaries between masculine and feminine so much as establish a new opposition within the category "feminine" itself. By the distinction made between "womanhood" and "ladyhood", the traditional masculine/feminine opposition is appropriated and reapplied without the hint of a loss of "femininity". "Ladyhood" is a term of disparagement, associated with ornamental indolence, passivity, uselessness, and invalidism. "Womanhood" on the other hand asserts strength, usefulness, and health, although still confined within the private sphere. Although Ellis asserts the physical weakness of women, her redefinition of femininity allows women, despite the natural

"illness" of their bodies, a moral strength and superiority, which, in effect, makes them more important in her view of the world, than men, and centralizes, rather than marginalizes the domestic sphere. As we have seen, Yonge, in her novels, does not go as far as Ellis, but nevertheless constructs a strong femininity based on the home and family. Illness is used in her novels to "feminize" her characters, men and women alike, to produce a Christian ideal of sacrifice and suffering which leads to spiritual and moral health. The "natural" "healthy" woman in her novels is the wife/mother figure who accepts her place in the "natural" order of things as her life's work. In both Ellis's and Yonge's works, usefulness, activity, and spiritual strength are signs of true femininity.

Mary Braddon and the sensation novel evoke tropes of disease, rather than illness, and raise questions about art and artifice, and the very production of knowledge. Criticism of the sensation novel categorized it as a form of literary contagion, a transgressive genre which threatened to infect the body of "pure" and "serious" literature. The rhetorical strategies thus employed, I have argued, through the use of the metaphor of disease, linked sensation criticism with the debate on prostitution, and defined the sensation novel in terms of class and gender. The oppositional structure so imposed established serious literature, including "higher" forms of the novel, as masculine, middle-class and healthy. Sensation fiction, however, was feminine, lower class and contaminated. One of the criticisms of the sensation novel, was that, unlike the novel of "realism", it disregarded detailed psychological characterization and relied on plot. Mary Braddon's early novels deliberately exploit this situation to destabilize the concepts of "depth" or "stability" of character itself, and the essentialism of the feminine ideal. Her novels both subvert and reinforce the domestic ideal of femininity by having heroines who transgress its codes although patriarchal order is re-established at the end of the novels. Through the use of mystery and secrecy, and the implication that truth is something that must be revealed,

nothing is as it seems. The epitome of angelic femininity, of “natural” womanhood, is a bigamist and murderer, an “unnatural” woman, who might be sane and might be mad. By implication, in Braddon’s novels femininity is a product of mirrors, not innate, and woman an “eminently artificial thing”.

Hélène Cixous has written that

the (political) economy of the masculine and of the feminine is organized by different requirements and constraints, which, when socialized and metaphorized, produce signs, relationships of power, relationships of production and of reproduction, an immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine or feminine.⁶

Illness, as we have seen, was culturally inscribed and read as “feminine”. All three writers of literature, Gaskell, Braddon and Yonge, whether recognized canonically or rescued from popular oblivion, whether domestically safe or sensationally challenging, engaged with the “authorizing” discourses of medicine, public debate, and conduct books. Illness figured in all these discourses, as an integral part of the mid-nineteenth-century construction of femininity, sexuality and “true womanhood”.

⁶ Cixous, “Sorties” 65.

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